

An analysis of the learning relationships amongst
micro-firm owner/managers and stakeholders in a
small-firm learning network in the Irish tourism sector

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Declaration

The author hereby declares that, except where duly acknowledged and referenced, this research study is entirely her own work and has not been submitted for any degree or other qualification in Waterford Institute of Technology or any other third level institution in Ireland or abroad.

Leana Reinl, June 2008

Abstract

An analysis of the learning relationships amongst micro-firm owner/managers and stakeholders in a small-firm learning network in the Irish tourism sector

Leana Reinl

This thesis reports the findings from an action research project carried out over a two year period, exploring micro-firm owner/manager learning in a small-firm learning network in the Irish tourism sector.

Learning networks are cited in contemporary literature as a key means for creating and sustaining competitive advantage in micro-firms. Specifically, national and international research studies acknowledge the importance of micro-firm network-centred learning in the tourism sector, where an integral part of this learning process is the network of relationships participants cultivate through involvement in formal learning programmes of this nature. Despite their importance in the context of small business development, networks have traditionally been relatively neglected as an area of academic study.

This thesis commences with a comprehensive review of literature relating to micro-firm learning, outlining a range of unique features and influences on learning in this environment. The influence that participation in a learning network has on micro-firm owner/manager learning is then considered. The primary research focuses on the south and south east County Based Tourism Learning Network (CBTLN). This initiative is facilitated by Fáilte Ireland and Waterford Institute of Technology and is the learning catalyst in the context of this study.

The adopted research methodology is preceded by a review of alternative research methods. The motivations and rationale for adopting an interpretive stance are discussed before the rationale for choosing an action research approach is outlined.

The key contribution of this research is the development of a framework for micro-firm owner/manager learning in a learning network environment. Adopting an action research methodology, the author sought to establish, catalogue and analyse the learning relationships amongst micro-firm owner/managers and stakeholders within a small-firm learning network.

The thesis concludes by providing an outline of the study's contribution to knowledge and its research limitations. Finally recommendations for future research are outlined.

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Dedication

To Nicholas,

Looking back at the end of this research project I would like to thank you for that first positive push that prompted a learning journey many years ago- for all the smiles and positive words along the way, there are few things that are more valuable to me.

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List of Abbreviations

CBTLN:	County Based Tourism Learning Network
CSO:	Central Statistics Office
EU:	European Union
GVA:	Gross Value Added
HETAC:	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
LNA:	Learning Needs Analysis
NCEO:	National Commission on Entrepreneurship
RBV:	Resourced Based View
SME:	Small and Medium Sized Enterprise
TBDP:	Tourism Business Development Plan
TLN:	Tourism Learning Network
TPDS:	Tourism Product Development Strategy

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Glossary of Terms

Absorptive capacity: The ability of a firm to value, assimilate and apply new knowledge.

Adult learning: The transformation of experiences into knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Illeris, 2003)

Anchor: Deepening what has been learned through utilising learning style preference or association for example, to achieve deeper levels of learning.

Communities of practice: This term refers to groups of people joined together through common activities and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger, 1998). It involves a shared practice that is understood and renegotiated by its members.

Group learning: The process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team to create the results its members truly desire (Senge 1990; 236).

Individual learning: A learning process taking place in isolation but not necessarily without teacher direction and structured activities (adapted from Blackmore 1998 and Gorli, 2003)

Learning: The process of gaining knowledge or skill through study, practice or teaching

Learning Network (LN): A network established to facilitate enterprise performance in the independent business environment (Jack et al., 2004)

Learning Needs Analysis (LNA): The LNA referred to in this thesis is a document designed by the CBTLN and completed by participants prior to commencing the CBTLN programme. The document captures participants' current knowledge levels on various business topics/skills across a number of functional business areas.

Learning set: The learning set (in the context of this research) relates to groups of network members assigned to local network sets. These sets comprise six to eight businesses from a particular locality.

Network: The verb network describes the action of the owner/manager as he/she interacts with the environment.

Reflective practice: Reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering and critically analysing our actions and own experiences with the goal of improving our professional practice (Johnson and Geal, 2005: 40).

Reflexivity: This concept is used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research (Brannick and Coghlan (2007; 583)

Reflexive practitioner: A reflexive practitioner can be defined as someone who reflects back over their work/learning at regular intervals, to consider how they might improve through what they have learned from that experience. Through reflection the practitioner can relate what has been learned back to the business environment, achieving deeper levels of learning.

Tourism Business Development Plan (TBDP): The business development plan referred to in this thesis outlines 4 key business areas:

1. Introduction to tourism marketing
2. Regulatory framework for tourism businesses
3. I.T as a business tool
4. Tourism enterprise development

Participants detail actions resulting from learning on the CBTLN programme under each section. This document is submitted with other key learning documents for assessment of learning and accreditation.

Micro-firm (definition): The European Union (EU) defines a micro-enterprise as one that employs no more than ten full-time employees (EU, 2005). The terms micro-enterprise, micro-business and micro-tourism business/firm all equate to the EU definition.

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.0 Overview

The economic and social contribution of micro-tourism businesses cannot be overstated. In 2005, there were almost 20 million enterprises active within the non-financial business economy (NFBE)¹ within the twenty seven European Union countries. Nearly all of these enterprises (92 per cent) were micro-businesses. This share varied only marginally between Member States, data in the Irish context reflects European rates (CSO, 2006). Until the 1980s small business research was largely neglected (Hisrich and Drnovsek, 2002) and research into the micro-firm milieu even more so (Kelliher, 2006). Considering the contribution this sector makes to society, micro-firm research warrants individual attention, separate from that of small and medium-sized firms' research studies.

This is not to suggest that all micro-firms are the same. Devins et al, (2005) called for an avoidance of labelling '*vaguely related*' small-firms with uniform characteristics. The heterogeneity of micro-firms has led many to recommend that future research would benefit from the adoption of a sectoral research focus (Burrows and Curran, 1989: 42). However one of the major difficulties in developing this sector is that their development needs are as Gibb (1983) describes them highly differentiated.

Burrows and Curran (1989) further point out that it would be a valid exercise to compare the attributes of small-firms within the same area of activity and also calls for research specifically on the micro-firm sector. These authors also contend that lessons can be learned from previous small business research in relation to spatial variation; reinforcing the need for geographic specific studies (Burrows and Curran, 1989: 42). Therefore this study investigates micro-firm learning activity in the tourism sector in Ireland.

¹ The non-financial business economy (NFBE) excludes agriculture, public administration and other non-market services

Unique conditions in the micro-firm setting include organisational structure, culture, management style (Welsh and White, 2000) and even management response to business problems (Phillipson et al., 2004; Storey and Cressey, 1995). These facts suggest that micro-firms warrant individual attention separate from small and medium firm research studies. These findings negate the traditional assumption that management practices that work in the large firm environment will also work in the small-firm (Welsh and White, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). Academic research specifically focusing on the micro-firm has been rare (Kelliher and Henderson, 2005). Devins et al. (2005) argue that there is a fundamental gap in the literature regarding management development in the micro-firm context and further suggest that the learning preferences of owner/managers in this unique group require exploration in order to support their role in the economy and to assist in building effective interventions. Based on the preceding overview, this study seeks to investigate owner/manager learning in a network environment.

In an Irish context, Fáilte Ireland is the national body responsible for developing the tourism industry. The Fáilte Ireland Human Resource Strategy for Irish Tourism 2005-2010 highlighted the problems that small businesses face in relation to access and relevance of education and training. The County Based Tourism Learning Networks (CBTLN) arose from recognition of these issues. There are a number of CBTLN in operation across Ireland. The CBTLN south and south east are examples of these learning networks and these are original in that they are designed and managed by the School of Business at Waterford Institute of Technology. These networks provide a flexible, action-orientated model of learning which addresses the particular challenges and learning barriers faced by SME and micro tourism enterprises. This study involves the investigation of owner/manager learning in the Fáilte Ireland CBTLN south and south east.

1.0.1 Networks and networking defined

According to Monstead (1995), networking is a vogue concept. This has led to the term being used in everyday language and as such there are several meanings given to the term (Lynch, 2000). A network is not confined to that of permanent relations (Granovetter, 1992) and contends that they are primarily a cultural phenomenon in the small-firm

environment. According to Chell and Baines (2000) networking does not have an objective independent of the person who is networking, a sentiment shared by others who describe networking as a social construction which exists only because the individual understands it to exist and uses it (Johannisson, 1995 and Monstead, 1995).

There is much taxonomy of networks throughout the literature and they take numerous forms and can be established for a variety of different purposes. They can be formed within and between large multinational corporations or between small-firms. This research will specifically focus upon a learning network, established to facilitate enterprise performance in the independent business environment (Jack et al., 2004). The network under research is the Fáilte Ireland CBTLN south and south east. This network is therefore the learning catalyst in the context of this research study.

Networking has been found to be a valuable programme element for entrepreneurs (Lean, 1998; Raffo et al., 2000; De Faoite et al., 2003). Many previous researchers have expressed the view that networks are important and beneficial for a variety of reasons. Fuller-Love and Thomas (2004) assert that networks are one of the main reasons for regional success, while others argue that networks are a critical element of an entrepreneurial climate (Malewicki, 2005). Research conducted by Wheelock and Chell (1997) shows that growing businesses were more likely to network actively with other businesses. An over-reliance on informal networks has also been attributed as a weakness in the micro-firm context, conversely successful entrepreneurs have been found to have a large network of 'weak tie' relations, (Philipson et al., 2004). In terms of learning networks and their contribution to business development, this view is supported by Hannon et al. (2000) who assert that learning is a mechanism for assisting small and micro-firm growth and survival.

As previously discussed, resource poverty is identified throughout the literature as a major barrier to small-firm development. Networks have been found to assist in combating this issue by providing a means for participants to acquire information and resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them (Witt, 2004; National Commission on Entrepreneurship, 2006). As such Witt (2004) contends that the resources possessed by a business will have a

bearing upon network success. This reflects a view that combined resources (if they are disseminated throughout the network) will result in the improvement of owner/manager competencies and hence improve business performance. Research provides statistical evidence of the positive relationship between business performance and networking (Chell and Baines, 2000) reinforcing the potential value of networking in this context.

Research has found that micro-firm owner/managers often utilise informally absorbed information (Greenbank, 2000) derived from their environment to aid the decision making process. The micro-firm owner/manager's preference for using informally gathered information and advice, has implications for learning which can be acquired and fostered through entrepreneurial learning networks, this will be discussed in more detail in section 3.6 p.42. This perhaps justifies Taylor and Thorpe's (2004) criticism of cognitive approaches to learning such as Kolb's (1976) for not including the social context of the learner, leaving him/her somewhat in the wilderness.

In the social and situational approaches to learning, learners build knowledge through shared experiences and activities and through interaction and observation in social contexts such as communities of practice (see glossary for details). This approach highlights the value of social participation and conversation. Integrative learning focuses upon learning from differences in content, point of view and learning style in a climate where the differences can be examined in a constructive manner (Kolb, 1986). Bottrup (2005) points out that if learning occurs outside the firm (in a network for example), then the learner needs to transform this learning into the context of their own work environment. Bottrup (2005) further asserts that for learning to transfer back to the organisation, interplay between network learning and the follow up back in participants' own businesses is required.

1.1 Research aim and objectives

The principal objective of this research is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment. The network under study for the purpose of this research is the Fáilte Ireland County Based Tourism Learning Network (CBTLN) south and south east. This network is the learning catalyst in the context of this study. The literature review reveals that there is insufficient knowledge regarding learning in the micro-firm environment (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Crossan et al., 1999; O' Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Schaper and Campo, 2005; Devins et al., 2005) particularly from a network perspective (Down, 1991; Chell and Baines, 2000; Malewicki, 2005; Lynch, 2000). There is no research to date on this topic within the tourism sector in the south and south east region of Ireland despite requests for sector specific research (Chaston et al., 1999; Burrows and Curran, 1989) into micro-firm learning.

Previous research highlights that too little is known about how learning between small-firms and their stakeholders takes place (Thomas and Thomas, 2006), how learning transfer takes place and even less about how knowledge becomes embedded in the micro-firm environment (Kelliher, 2007). This view is supported by Chaston and Baker (1998) who assert that successful learning relationships are not understood by the stakeholders or organisations that support them while Gibb (2002) states that there is a lack of detailed consideration of how entrepreneurs learn. There is also a gap in the literature regarding management development and the learning preferences of owner/managers in the micro-firm (Devins et al., 2005).

While literature shows that learning from others is one of the primary motivations for network participation, the affect of working closely with peers is often not realised or reported (Rosenfeld, 1996). Malewicki (2005) states that there also appears to be little research in the area of enhancing and supporting member longevity within the network setting. Gibb (1997) argues that improving the development of small-businesses requires the competency of the network as well as the competency of the businesses involved, and the National Commission on Entrepreneurship (NCEO) (2006) recommended that training

and education programmes should be implemented with advice from and sometimes in partnership with entrepreneurial businesses in the region.

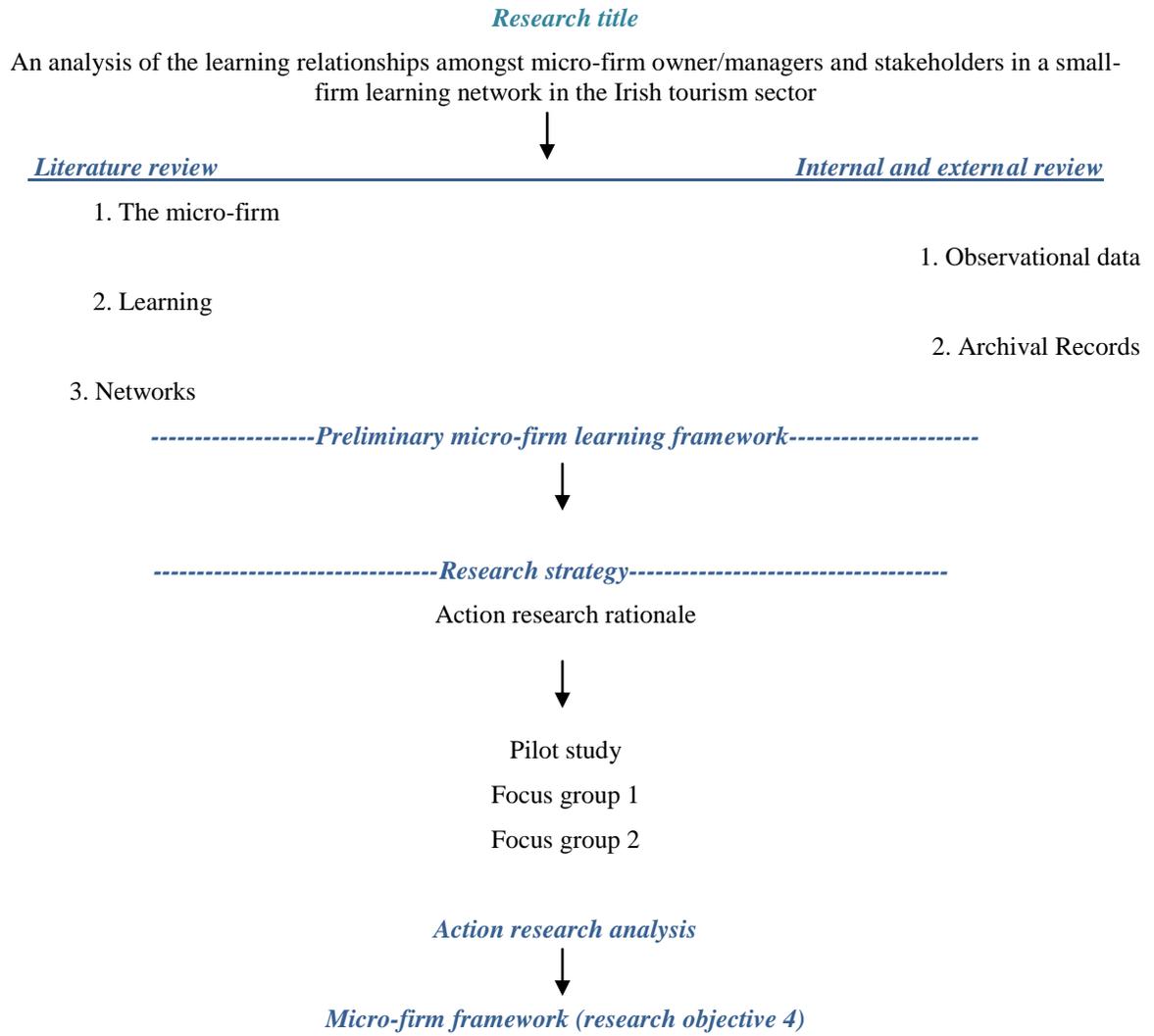
Based on these findings, there is an identified literature gap in relation to micro-firm learning, specifically within the tourism sector. There appears to be little knowledge about the learning preferences of micro-firm owner/managers and little research in relation to networks as successful learning environments for this cohort. This gap has led to the establishment of the research objectives of this study. They are as follows:

1. To identify the levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment.
2. To examine the relationship between learning acquired and learning impact: changes which become embedded in the business.
3. To analyse the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the network.
4. To propose a framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment.

1.2 Thesis outline and structure

This section outlines each stage of the research process (Figure 1.1)

Figure 1.1
The research map



The literature review comprises two chapters. Chapter two looks at the micro-firm and its associated internal characteristics. These characteristics are what uniquely define the micro-firm learning environment and they are business structure, management, strategy and culture. As the owner/manager is the business in the majority of micro-firms (Lean, 1998) their approach to decision making, attitude towards learning, training and development and influence on knowledge management also impact the learning process in this setting. As resource poverty is a significant feature of the micro-firm (Welsh and White, 1981) the resource-based view (RBV) of business performance is also examined in the context of the research objectives. Finally external constraints are considered prior to the tabulation of the external and internal environmental influencers on the micro-business.

Chapter three examines the micro-firm learning environment. The impact of the network environment upon micro-firm owner/manager learning is then considered. Various learning theories are contemplated and Kolb's action learning model is selected as an appropriate baseline to build the micro-firm learning framework on. This chapter begins by discussing the national mandate and training policy in Ireland. This is followed by a review of the available literature on learning, training and development from a micro-firm owner manager's perspective, discussing the learning process, levels of learning and success factors influencing the learning relationship. The latter part of this chapter will discuss networks and their role in the facilitation of learning amongst entrepreneurs. Networks are increasingly being viewed as crucial to small-firm success and development (Down, 1999; Chaston and Baker, 1998) and relevant literature is explored in this context.

Chapter four goes on to examine the tourism sector from a micro-firm perspective. This chapter considers the business environment the micro-firm operates within before moving on to consider relevant government policy and initiatives on training, learning and development. The chapter then briefly outlines the role of Fáilte Ireland in supporting the development of micro-tourism businesses; specifically outlining the County Based Tourism Learning Network (CBTLN) initiative and the CBTLN south and south east as this network is the learning catalyst for this study.

Chapter five outlines the applied methodology in this research study. The chapter will examine theoretical and conceptual factors, which influenced the research design. The rationale for the chosen research methodology is then discussed. Methodological philosophies are debated and approaches to data collection and associated techniques are discussed and presented.

Chapter 6 profiles the findings resulting from the core action research project, examining how each finding addressed the primary research objective. The value of presenting the findings is in mapping the criteria that influences owner/manager learning in a micro-business environment. These findings subsequently inform the framework for micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment as outlined in objective 4.

Chapter seven goes on to discuss these findings and refine the framework in light of that discussion.

Chapter eight outlines the key research outcomes and key recommendations resulting from this research study. Contributions to knowledge are discussed, as are the research limitations. Finally recommendations for further academic research are made.

Chapter 2

The micro-firm

2.0 Introduction

Small-firms are not a homogenous group (Burrows and Curran, 1989, Hill and McGowan, 1999). The differences between large and small firms have been well documented (see Greenbank, 2000; Welsh and White, 1989; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000 among others) and Gibb (1983) and Greenbank (2000) argue these characteristics have a fundamental impact on development and training culture in these firms.

In the past the small-firm has been neglected in terms of training research and in terms of learning policy. Historically in Ireland there had been little opportunity to foster entrepreneurship (Garavan et al., 1997). While there has been a shift in public policy since the 1980s, Storey (1985) argues that this needs to be complimented by an increased knowledge of the problems faced by small-firms. The limited research available presently on micro-firm learning is arguably a testament to the need for greater knowledge about the learning challenges facing this business cohort. Therefore this chapter will look at the internal and external factors which influence learning in the micro-firm context. It is first helpful to define what is meant by the term micro-firm.

2.0.1 Defining the micro-firm

There are multiple definitions of the small and micro-firm, based on size and turnover, number of employees and other characteristics, although definitions are usually based on employment (Lange et al., 2000) particularly in the European context. The European Union (EU) defines a micro-firm as one who employs less than 10 employees, a small enterprise as one who employs 10 and 49 full-time workers; while medium sized enterprises consist of between 50 and 249 full-time workers (EU, 2005).

The term micro-firm usually relates to a business that employs less than ten people (Stanworth and Gray, 1991; Storey, 1994), consistent with the definition provided by the European Union (EU, 2005). Relevant Irish government agencies including Enterprise

Ireland and F6r6f6as uphold the EU definition in the Irish context, a stance supported by Irish academic writers including O'Dwyer and Ryan (2000); Lawless et al. (2000) and Kelliher and Henderson (2006). Other more recent European academic writers also follow the definition (Phillipson et al, 2004; Devins et al., 2005), while Morrison and Teixeira (2004) support it in the tourism context.

For the purpose of this research the author will also adopt the above definition of the micro-firm as one which employs less than 10 full time employees; this definition will be used as a reference point when referring to other academic literature. Where this literature refers to 'small business' and equates to organisations with less than 10 employees, it can be assumed to relate to micro-firms despite the different label of such a business. Much of the previous research on small and micro-firms has tended to pigeon hole these organisations within the definition of a Small and Medium sized Enterprise (SME). This reflects a perspective that what works for the larger firm can also work for the small-firm, a view rejected by the small-firm research community (for example, Welsh and White, 1981; Gibb, 1983; Ruiz-Mercadez et al., 2006). Research has also suggested that the differences found between large and small businesses are even more pronounced in relation to the micro-firm sector (Whaley, 2003) a view upheld in recent research. Storey and Cressey (1996) point out that not only are the issues which face small-firms fundamentally different, the manner with which these issues are responded to also differs considerably from that of their larger counterparts and therefore warrant research attention in their own right.

2.0.2 The micro-firm – An Irish context

Devins et al. (2005) emphasise the importance of a strong small business sector to the economy. Central Statistics Office (CSO) data from 2005 reflect the dominance of the micro-firm sector revealing that 216,000 micro-businesses are operating in Ireland accounting for the vast majority (92.7 per cent) of all Irish businesses. This percentage is comparable to that of the European micro-enterprise rate.

The vast majority of micro-firms are not growth focused (Lawless, 2000; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) and the sustainability of many of these firms is questionable, leading some to

argue the case for improvement in policy and support (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2003). The Report of the Small Business Forum, (2006) suggests that Ireland's proportion of nascent entrepreneurs² is much lower than that of other European entrepreneurial countries. It is therefore the increasing number of micro-firms rather than their ability to increase employment that has led to their increasing significance (Greenbank, 2000). Learning support that improves managerial competence will improve the survival rate of small businesses (Report of The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2006; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000).

2.0.3 Micro-firm strategic success and growth

High failure rates and modest growth characteristics are representative of most micro-firms (Devins et al, 2005; Roper, 1999). Forty per cent of small-firms cease to trade within the first three years (Smallbone, 1990; Storey and Johnson, 1987) and eighty per cent fail (Cressey and Storey, 1995) in the longer term. Research from Ganguly (1985) in the same time period shows that the smallest businesses were failing at a rate that was six times higher than their larger counterparts. Perhaps more worryingly, previous research indicates that there is little distinction between businesses that fail and those which are just surviving (Smallbone, 1990).

It has previously been noted that many micro-firms do not seek to grow their business (Chell and Baines, 2000) and the majority of Irish micro-firms have been found to operate in the traditional rather than growth focused milieu (Lawless et al., 2000; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000). Lack of growth in the small-firm has been attributed to a distinct lack of resources (Chaston, 1999). This resource poverty is a key feature of the micro-business and as such it will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Lack of growth may also be explained by a lack of managerial capability which has been previously identified as an inhibitor to micro-firm growth (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2006). Managerial skills and capabilities are particularly important in established businesses to enable owner/managers to deal with external shocks (Storey, 1994) and are a key aspect of this study.

² Nascent entrepreneur refers to entrepreneurs at an advanced phase of business set-up.

2.1 Learning capacity in the micro-firm environment

Micro-firms are not a homogenous group (Duhan et al., 2001) and particularly so in relation to learning (Devins et al., 2005). Various internal and external characteristics influence learning in the micro-firm setting, these characteristics will now be discussed.

2.1.1 Internal characteristics of the micro-firm

Certain internal characteristics of the micro-firm bear an influence upon learning; these internal characteristics include the micro-firm's structure, strategy, culture and the role that the owner/manager assumes in the business.

2.1.1.1 The organisational structure of the micro-firm

The organisational structure of the micro-firm can be described as simple (Mintzberg, 1983) while Morrison and Teixeira (2004) describe the organisational structure in micro tourism-businesses as flat. These descriptions reflect the centralised control and decision making found in the micro-firm setting, where very often the owner/manager is the business (Lean, 1998) and consequently there is little separation of ownership and control (Greenbank, 2000). The 'simple' organisational structure of the micro-firm negates the requirement for a formal management development system, and therefore management structure and controls are often informal in this setting (Matlay, 1999; Hannon et al., 2000).

2.1.1.1.1 Micro-firm management

Previous research in an Irish context reveals that the majority of micro-firm owner/managers have managerial shortcomings (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000). While responsibility for a wide array of tasks is part of the job description of the micro-firm owner/manager, their management skills are developed largely by trial and error (Schaper et al., 2005) as they experience managing their business day-to-day. Storey and Cressey (1996) have commented on the value of this 'life experience' which they argue acts as a buffer against business failure; these authors also contend that business ownership can be viewed as a 'learning experiment' in and of itself.

Informal relationships are reflective of the informal management style found in the majority of micro-firms (Matlay, 1999). Smaller firms are therefore less likely to be functionally structured (Hannon et al., 2000) and owner/managers and their employees have to be multi-skilled (Lange et al, 2000) to fulfil numerous organisational roles. Some argue that this organisational structure supports a swifter decision-making process (Devins et al., 2005) and provides for greater flexibility, indeed the lack of organisational and management layers in the micro-firm context has been found to promote cross learning (Van der Wiele and Brown, 1998) in this environment.

The micro-firm structure can therefore be developed and enhanced to support a learning culture with the objective of building capabilities to assist the firm to survive and prosper (Kelliher and Reinl, 2007). Owner/manager attributes and capabilities can impact positively or negatively upon business performance and learning in the micro-firm setting. The influence of the owner/manager on learning and development in this setting will be discussed below (section, 2.1.1.4, p. 15).

2.1.1.2 Strategy formulation

Previous research has shown that the approach to strategic planning in the small-firm is informal and is rarely communicated to others in the business (McCarthy and Leavy, 2000). Hall (1995) points out that formal strategic planning is not an activity normally undertaken in the small-firm. Later research from McCarthy and Leavy (2000) found that the small-firm owner/manager will sometimes adopt a strategic approach based upon intuitive learning, while at times a more formal strategy is appropriate and necessary.

Gibb and Scott's (2001) findings support that of Hall (1995), formalised planning is not likely to exist in the small-firm. Indeed personal and subjective business objectives have been found to be prevalent in the small-firm setting (Simpson, 2001). The authors comment that this may not be a reflection of the capability of the business, in fact the developmental process can be dynamic and is characterised by the owner/manager's attitude and 'learning by doing'. Therefore strategy is an incremental process in the small-firm setting, which emerges as the organisation adapts or learns (Wyer et al. 2000). Gibb and Scott (2001)

therefore encourage the development of strategic awareness amongst small-firm owner managers. The difficulty in achieving this is reflected in the findings of a study conducted by Schaper et al. (2005) which suggests that the micro-business owner has difficulty in separating strategic planning from day-to-day problem solving, which may have an impact on the micro-firms long term success.

2.1.1.3 Micro-firm culture

Culture can be defined as a collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organisation. Values encapsulate beliefs, ideas and behaviours and from these values norms develop that shape the way members of an organisation behave (Hill and Jones, 1998). Hill and Jones (1998) also contend that organisational culture functions as a form of strategic control in a business, notably the training culture in the micro-firm tends to gravitate towards short-term issues faced by the business (Schaper et al., 2005). Some argue that this is a direct reflection of the owner/manager's influence. Due to little separation of ownership and control in the micro-firm, the owner/manager assumes a pivotal role in shaping the culture of the business (Lange et al., 2000).

While culture can foster learning in the micro-firm environment it can also dissuade learning. Prahalad and Hamel (1990) argue that the only way to achieve learning competencies is through collaborative organisational learning which can be nurtured through the organisation's culture. As culture is seen as an extension of the owner's personality it can be assumed that the owner/manager will shape learning in the micro-firm environment. According to Kolb (1976) true learning takes place when values and norms become modified, but this can be difficult to achieve in the micro-firm setting. These firms are extremely resource poor (Devins et al., 2005) leaving little opportunity for developmental learning and reflection. This may foster a culture that is not open to change (Devins et al., 2005).

2.1.1.4 Role and influence of the owner/manager on learning and development

Many have argued that key to the success and survival of small-firms is the competencies, skills and knowledge that their managers possess (Down, 1999; Fáilte Ireland Tourism

Product Development Strategy, 2007). The level of influence that owner/managers of micro-firms assert over the management (Greenbank, 2000) and development (Devins et al., 2005) of their business is substantial. Owner/managers wield a powerful influence over development and training within micro-firms (Gibb, 1983). This influence affects the way that strategy is formulated and decisions are taken and also influences training, learning and knowledge management within the business, wherein the established management practice can include a reluctance to introduce change (Devins et al., 2005). These owner/manager attributes and capabilities are tabulated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1
Micro-firm managerial competence criteria catalogue

Owner/manager attribute	Strength/Effective	Weakness/Ineffective	Managerial competencies
Strong willed	Drive and motivation	Openness to suggestions and less absorptive capacity	Learning and improving
Paternalistic managerial style	Close communication	Short-termism	Leadership and direction
Intuitive	Tacit knowledge	Ideas are not tested	Idea and opportunity generation
Lack of reflection	Organisational learning	Non learning transfer	Development of human resources
Informal planner	Adaptive	Employees lacking objectives, responsibility and vision of the future	Identification of short and longer term learning needs

Adapted from Kelliher and Reinl, 2007

2.1.1.4.1 Owner/manager's influence on knowledge management

Many share the view that the creation of knowledge which can be dispersed throughout the company is a major source of competitive advantage (Gunnigle et al., 2002). The acquisition of new knowledge in the micro-firm context usually occurs when a critical

incident arises that the owner/manager must deal with immediately (Kelliher, 2007). This fire-fighting approach to training and learning is not reflective of a knowledge management process which facilitates organisational learning and the development of analytical capabilities. To create a competitive edge, the micro-firm owner/manager needs to adjust the way that knowledge is managed in the micro-firm setting. Dewey, Lewin and Piaget (cited in Kolb, 1984) all agree that learning is a process of knowledge creation, hence learning and knowledge management are not unrelated processes. Learning will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

2.1.1.5 Micro-firm skill development

According to Curran and Blackburn, (2001) among others, owner/managers are the main influencers of management training and development in the firm. Development can be defined as the general enhancement and growth of an individual's skills and abilities through conscious and unconscious learning with a view to enabling them to take up a future role in the organisation (Garavan et. al, 1995: 2).

The lack of clear development paths or development policy in the micro-firm setting results in little impetus for developmental activity on the part of the owner/manager. Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of developmental education to the owner/manager (Lean, 1998), it needs to be practically applicable (Schaper et al., 2005) to be of value. Lack of awareness about training and development programmes has been cited as a barrier to skill development in the micro-firm setting (Lean, 1998; Patton et al., 2000; Schaper et al., 2005). This is reflected in poor training participation rates, (Lawless et al., 2000; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) which could perhaps be explained by a reported unwillingness on the part of the micro-firm owner/manager to take external advice, preferring to rely instead upon the advice and input of close friends and business people. Participation in external support services has also been reported to be low (EU Report, 2005; Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2003) supporting the view that micro-firm participation is traditionally low.

Previous researchers have commented that changing the attitudes of owner/managers to training is a challenge (Lange et al., 2000). As the owner/manager of the micro-firm makes most, if not all of the business decisions, his/her attitude is a key determinant variable of training within the micro-firm context. Small-firm owner/managers have a notoriously negative attitude to management training and development, this is reflected through poor rates of participation in training programmes (Thomson and Gray, 1999; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000).

2.1.1.6 Approach to decision making

In most instances in the micro-firm setting the owner is also the manager of the business and as such he/she will be the sole decision maker. Decision-making in the micro-firm tends to focus upon issues which require immediate attention (Storey and Cressey, 1996). A small-firms size coupled with its lack of formalised management structures of the small-firm aid a faster decision-making process (Storey and Cressey, 1995).

Decision making in the micro-firm context occurs mostly in isolation as there are few colleagues at hand to aid in a consultative process. Research has found that rather than acquire new information, previously collected informal information will be used to aid micro-firm owner/manager decision-making (Greenbank, 2000). While some have argued that this decision making process could be considered rational in light of the resource poverty which characterises this particular cohort (Deakins and Freel, 1998), Schaper et al. (2005) point out that it often occurs in haste, with little consideration if any, for any form of long-term planning. As a result, decisions with a short-term focus (Schaper et al, 2005) which result in short-term returns are favoured over those which require longer-term investment. This 'short-termism' is a key feature of micro-firm decision-making. The next section of this chapter will consider the resourced-based view of business performance and its impact on learning, training and development in the micro-firm.

2.1.2 The resource based view of business performance

The resource- based view (RBV) of the business refers to the resources required by the business to compete and develop in the environment (Duhan et al., 2001). This is achieved

through nurturing the core competencies of the business (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). The RBV contends that the firm is made up of tangible and intangible resources which are leveraged to create organisational capabilities (Almor and Hashai, 2004; Aragon-Sanchez and Sanchez-Marin, 2005). Hill and Jones (1998) draw a distinction between resources and capabilities and assert that a business may not require resources to establish a distinctive competency once it has the capability that the competitor does not possess. Capabilities are also made up of intangible resources (Barney et al., 2001) hence learning and management development in the micro-firm context are crucial for the success of the business. In the micro-firm setting the learning environment is restricted due to resource poverty (for example time and expertise). Resource poverty as it was termed by Welsh and White (1981) describes a significant feature of the micro-firm, one which greatly distinguishes it from larger firms and also from small-firms. In micro-enterprises this limited resource availability has proven to be an important influencer upon the operation, development and growth (Perren, 1999) of the business. It also constrains learning in the micro-firm context (Kelliher, 2007) and may also influence how training and learning are perceived in this environment.

Barriers to learning opportunities have been cited as a reason for weak management skills and business failure within the tourism sector in particular (Comhar Briefing Paper, 2006). Inefficient management practice in the small tourism-business setting has been identified as a major contributor to resource poverty (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004) and inhibits the micro-firms ability to engage with the learning process (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006). Almor and Hashai (2004) contend that while the strongest resources/capabilities of a business can be a source of competitive advantage which require nurturing, weaker resources/capabilities can have the effect of 'neutralising' any advantage created, arguably demonstrating that these weaker resources/capabilities require strengthening if competitive advantage is to be maintained.

2.1.2.1 Time constraints within the micro-firm environment

Many researchers have found that time restrictions in the micro-firm prohibit training, development and learning (Lange et al., 2000; Storey and Cressey, 1996). This problem

manifests due the wide array of tasks that the owner/ manager must carry out on a day-to - day basis and it means that the owner/manager cannot be away from the business for any significant amount of time without causing major upheaval, to the detriment of long term training and development planning (Schaper et al., 2005). With no opportunity to step back and take a long-term view of the business the micro-firm manager misses out on what has been shown to be an integral part of the entrepreneurial learning process (Sullivan, 2000) a key aspect of this research study.

The importance of reflection in the learning process has been well established by many authors (Gibb, 1983; Kolb, 1976 and 1984). Bypassing the analytical process, micro-firm owner/managers perception of learning needs may not match his/her actual learning needs (Gibb, 1983). The ability to become a reflexive practitioner (Cunliffe, 2004) is therefore constrained in this time-poor environment. This places the micro-firm owner/manager at a distinct disadvantage in terms of learning, as reflective observation is a critical aspect of the learning process. It is evident from the literature that training poses a high cost for the micro-firm owner in terms of time but it also represents a financial burden (Freel, 1999).

2.1.2.2 Financial constraints within the micro-firm

Micro-firms have very limited scope to obtain capital from financial institutions (Gibb, 1983). Previous studies have found that this lack of finance positively correlates to micro-firm failure (Smallbone, 1990). Smaller businesses are considered a higher risk and as such can be charged a risk premium by lending institutions (Cressey and Storey, 1996). More recent research in an Irish context (Report of the Small Business Forum, 2006) concurs that small businesses are still reporting that obtaining finance for start-up and growth purposes is problematic in Ireland. Restrictions to acquiring/securing finance can result in an inability on the part of the small-firm owner/manager to pay for financial services required by the business (Welsh and White, 2000). Access to capital and cost of external capital is also shown to be a determinant of management development in the business (Thomas and Gray, 1999). Limited finances equate to minimal training in the small-firm setting (Schaper et al., 2005) as the cost of training may prohibit involvement in this context. Where training does occur it is viewed in terms of cost not investment (SME Management Development

Report, 2005). As small-firms tend to favour investments that yield short-term results (Storey and Cressey, 1995), the owner/manager often has concerns that any investment in training will not yield a return promptly enough to justify the expenditure. Financing any form of training is therefore difficult in this setting, and an issue that should be considered when framing learning initiatives in the micro-firm context.

Poor financial flexibility also means that there can be little investment in human capital, particularly that of a specialist nature (Schaper et al, 2005), this human resource constraint will be discussed next.

2.1.2.3 Human resource constraints in the micro-firm setting

Micro-businesses with less human capital than their larger counterparts are more inclined to failure (Storey and Cressey, 1996). Sisson and Storey (1993) refer to an organisation's workforce as its most vital asset and one which is a fundamental component of its competitiveness (Armstrong and Brown, 2001). Unfortunately the micro-firm is characterised by a limited internal pool of human resources (Devins et al, 2005; Welsh and White, 2000), thereby restricting potential competitiveness.

De Faoite et al. (2003) maintain that training is required to maintain the absorptive capacity (see glossary) of the business. However it can be assumed that where human resources amongst other resources are limited, so to will be the absorptive capacity of the firm. In other words the small-firm's ability to assimilate information will be restricted (Rosenfeld, 1992, as cited in Fuellhart and Glasmeier, 2003) due to these constraints. Lange et al. (2000) contend that learning in the micro-firm context may not merely be constrained by unwillingness to learn but perhaps an inability to function with one member less in the workplace. As the owner/manager plays a pivotal role in the running of the business, participation in the learning process (particularly that of off-site formal training programmes) is often a luxury of which the micro-firm owner/manager cannot afford to avail. In the tourism context, lack of managerial capability (outside that provided by the owner/manager) means that there is often no one to run the business in the event that the owner/manager is off-site (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004).

The use of temporary contracts of employment in the micro-firm setting also limits the likelihood of formal training and skills development for employees (Lange et al., 2000). Where employees do receive training the micro-firm is unable to provide the internal labour market to retain these valuable human resources (Schaper et al., 2005). Labour turnover is therefore notably higher in the micro-firm setting and it is estimated that it exceeds twenty five per cent in the Irish tourism sector (Fáilte Ireland, HRD Strategy, 2005). This is hardly surprising considering that small-firms are constrained by their ability to recruit, train and retain managers due to their inability to offer remuneration packages, development opportunities and job security that larger firms can offer (Freel, 1999).

Lack of managerial resources can also influence attitudes towards the development of the tourism enterprise (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Low entry barriers in the tourism sector equate to a low percentage of formally educated managers (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Hannon et al, 2000; Smallbone, 1990) resulting in a formal knowledge constraint in this business setting. This impacts negatively upon learning as a lack of expertise implies that there is no one to identify training/learning needs or the behavioural changes associated with meeting these learning needs (Gibb, 1983). Therefore learning is a by-product of a business process rather than a process in itself (Devins et al., 2005). As the owner/manager is the key human resource in this environment, their developmental interests are directly related to the development of the business (Devins et al., 2005). Hence the owner/manager's attitude to learning; training and development directly impact the development of the business (see 2.1.1.4, p.15).

2.1.3 External constraints on micro-firm learning

Small-firms are more likely to experience external shocks. These shocks can have a serious impact on the small-firm and can even threaten its existence (Welsh and White, 2000; Storey and Cressey, 1996). External influences including the intensification of competition and weak market positioning contribute to 'short termism' and have an indirect influence upon training, management development and learning in the micro-firm setting.

The international operating environment has been characterised by many as relentlessly changing; this is also true in the tourism environment (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Micro-firms have experienced an intensification of competition in their business environment; this intensification is represented by ever-increasing government regulations, employment law, tax and interest rates (Welsh and White, 2000). The Report of the Small Business Forum (2006) cites high inflation as a contributor to rising input costs such as energy and waste disposal in the Irish context. These costs have a disproportionate effect on the micro-firm and can act as a disincentive to growth leaving little scope for financial investment in training (SME Development in Ireland, 2005).

The limited competitive influence (Storey and Cressey, 1995; Simpson, 2001) micro-firms hold in the market place results in extreme sensitivity to environment changes. Specifically the inability of the micro-firm to leverage competitive advantage results in a weak market position in the tourism sector (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). This competitive business environment manifests in a short-range management perspective (Welsh and White, 1981) where development occurs as a result of external shocks (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000). Kelliher and Henderson (2006) argue that learning time in the micro-firm is restricted by external environmental factors however previous research also demonstrates that micro-firms are very adaptive due to the nature of their small size and informal structure.

2.2 Summary of key themes

Table 2.2

Environmental influencers on micro-firm owner/manager learning

Micro-firm internal environment		
Criteria	Aspect	Influence on learning
Structure	Little separation of ownership and control Limited pool of human resources	Knowledge and learning constraints
Strategy	Informal, incremental process Short-termism	Based on intuitive learning, learning by doing, ideas not tested Informal (unspoken) strategy, tacit knowledge
Management skills and capabilities	Developed from experience Established management practice	Analytical process bypassed Reluctance to change Little impetus for development
Owner/manager attributes	Influence Attitude	Value own business experience (and others) Need to see value of training/ learning
Decision making	Personal business objectives Crisis management	Shaped by previous informal information Short-term training/ learning gains are valued
Micro-firm external environment		
Diseconomies of scale	Weak market position	Short-termism Inability to leverage competitive advantage
Regulatory burden	Rely on advice of friends Levels of awareness and participation are low	Informal information gathering Quality of information used for decision making is questionable

2.3 Conclusion

The unique challenges facing the micro-firm sector have led many to conclude that the way to leverage small-firm competitiveness and success is through the development of management/organisational capability. This is not an easy task considering the fiercely competitive environment in which these firms operate; the heterogeneity of micro-firms, their unique internal characteristics and the resource constraints prevalent in micro-firms.

The importance of learning for micro-firm survival and growth has been well established, although these firms have been shown to lack managerial capability and have a notoriously low uptake for formal training programmes and general business support services. A review of the relevant literature reveals the micro-firm is a unique entity in the learning context. The training needs of this heterogeneous group are highly differentiated, (Gibb, 1983) and rigid training structures can impede management and staff development in smaller firms, creating barriers to learning (Comhar Briefing Paper, 2006). Perhaps the failure of training providers to take into account the small-firm owner/managers' preference for 'learning by doing' (Down, 1999) offers some insight into the negativity levelled at these training provisions. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that a clearer understanding of the situated learning process of micro-firms is required while Gibb (2006) contends that to be effective, interventions need to reflect the entrepreneurs way of seeing, doing and learning things. Sullivan (2000) states that entrepreneurs need to see the added value of training in terms of improving their ability to learn. As micro-firm owner/managers perceive themselves not as professional managers but as "business people" (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) they place great importance on action learning.

As outlined previously management skills in the micro-firm setting are developed as the manager goes about managing the day-to-day running of the business (Schaper et al., 2005). Cressey and Storey (1995) assert that this past experience and lifetime management skill are contributory factors to the robustness of a small business, a view endorsed by micro-firm owner/managers who perceive these skills as paramount to the growth and survival of their businesses (Lean, 1998). Greenbank, (2000) found that 'experience' is shaped by the social context; past and present within which the micro-firm operates, thus

network impact on individual learning is considered in the next chapter. The next chapter will firstly look at owner/ manager learning and development in a micro-firm context before moving on to the role that networking can play in the facilitation of that learning.

Chapter 3

Owner/manager learning in the micro-firm

3.0 Introduction

The lack of research on micro-firm learning has been highlighted by recent academic authors (Devins et al, 2005; Kelliher, 2006). Barriers to learning have been cited as a major cause of management skills deficiency and business failure; this is also reflected in the tourism sector in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland HRD Strategy, 2005). Many authors agree that in order to succeed in today's competitive business environment businesses require the ability to learn effectively (Senge 1990, Argyris, 1996). In an Irish context however the majority of micro-firms have been described as merely surviving (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) highlighting a gap in applied learning in this environment.

The Bolton Report (1971) represents one of the earliest attempts to research small-firms in the UK (Storey, 1994 and Curran and Blackburn, 2001) and it highlighted the lack of vocational and educational training in the small business sector (Matlay, 1999). Research dating back to the nineties called for a stronger training element from support agencies (Smallbone, 1990). More recent research has suggested that meeting the learning needs of small-firms requires an enterprising, entrepreneurial method which encompasses networking, along with local and self-development knowledge into pedagogical practices (Gibb, 1993).

The frailty of the relationship between small-firm owner/managers and training/ learning institutions is well highlighted throughout the literature. Down (1999: 268) refers to two distinct supply side issues. The first is the provision of inadequate training in a format that is inaccessible to small-firm owner/managers. The second issue relates to the provision of appropriate training and stimulation of learning in general which is viewed as problematic. Despite the lack of resources available in the micro-firm setting (discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.1.2, p.18) research shows that the uptake for formal training from this cohort of businesses has been slow (Thompson and Gray, 1999). Later research concurs that formal

training and learning structures are more prevalent as employee numbers rise (Smallbone, 1990; Lange et al., 2000). The issues highlighted above have led many researchers to call for the provision of education offerings that reflect the needs of the micro-business community (for example O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Schaper et al., 2005).

This chapter begins by discussing the national mandate and training policy in Ireland. This is followed by a review of the available literature on learning, training and development from a micro-firm owner manager's perspective. The latter part of this chapter will discuss networks and their role in the facilitation of learning amongst entrepreneurs. Networks are increasingly being viewed as crucial to small-firm success and development (Down, 1999; Chaston and Baker, 1998). The ability of the small-firm owner/manager to build effective relationships that enhance learning is important in terms of assisting small-firm success and survival, particularly in times of uncertainty (Gibb, 1997). While it has been shown that a positive relationship exists between networking and business success (Wheelock and Chell, 1997) the literature on network learning from a micro-firm perspective is scarce.

3.1 National mandate and training policy in Ireland

Management education in the small-firm setting is becoming increasingly important from a government policy perspective. The National Tourism Policy Review report (2004: 21) recognised the important role that the government had to play in '*supporting the enhancement of business capability and capacity within a tourism industry that is largely owner-operated and small in scale*'. The Enterprise Strategy Group Report (2004) cited the effective development of management capability in the small-firm context as an essential condition for sustainable enterprise recommending the use of business networks for small scale businesses in pursuit of this goal. Fáilte Ireland's HRD strategy (2005) also recommends that small business owner/managers participate in learning networks to enhance their business skills so that a premium tourism product can be achieved by the sector. The Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007-2013 (2007) also acknowledges management capability and business development as essential components in the delivery of a successful tourism product.

A report published by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2006) shows that management training reduces the failure rate of SME's but it also highlights many problems with traditional approaches, these problems include the failure of providers to take account of entrepreneurial education demands. The recommendations of this report include suggestions that providers of management development courses (including those provided by higher level institutions) need to respond to identified gaps and demands in relation to management development in smaller firms. The promotion of networking in the SME business environment is also a recommendation of this report.

3.2 Learning, training and development – a micro-firm perspective

This section of the chapter will consider learning, training and development from a micro-firm owner/manager perspective. It is helpful in this context to first define what is meant by learning.

3.2.1 Learning defined

Beach (1980) defines learning as a human process which embraces skills and knowledge and is only achieved when it results in a change of behaviour or the intention to change behaviour. Remarking on Beach's definition Kolb (1986) points out that learning starts from what the learner already knows and internalises. Kelly (1955: 3) reinforces the notion that learning "*is not something that happens to a person on occasion; it is what makes him a person in the first place*". This quote confirms that an individual does not begin the learning process as a blank canvas, conversely the learner will already have preconceived views or personal constructs which are brought to the process. The starting point in the learning process therefore begins with the individuals' personal construct (Kelly, 1955).

Kolb (1984) defines learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, being an emergent process its outcomes can only be conceived of in past tense where ideas are reformed through thought. Fiol and Lyles (1985) cited in Argyris and Schön (1996:189) define learning without the distinction of whether such learning occurs at an individual or organisational level as: '*The process of improving action through better knowledge and understanding*'. Rolland et al. (2006) view learning as

a process of knowledge creation, while others highlight the importance of the social practice through which that learning occurs (Brown and Duiguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991) suggesting a community of practice ethos. Various components of the definitions outlined above relate to four orientations to learning, these are detailed below in table 3.1.

Table 3.1
Four orientations to learning

Aspect	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social and situational
View of the learning process	Change in behaviour	Internal mental process (including insight, information processing, memory, perception)	A personal act to fulfil potential.	Interaction /observation in social contexts. Movement from the periphery to the centre of a community of practice
Locus of learning	Stimuli in external environment	Internal cognitive structuring	Affective and cognitive needs	The relationship between people and the environment.
Manifestations in adult learning	Behavioural objectives Competency-based education Skill development and training	Cognitive development Intelligence, learning and memory as function of age Learning how to learn	Andragogy Self-directed learning	Socialization Social participation Associationalism Conversation

Adapted from: Smith, 1999

The primary orientation to learning considering the overall objective is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment is behaviourist. As learning is considered to have taken place when it has been applied in the workplace (Kelly, 1955), indicating a change in behaviour, the behaviourist orientation to learning is the primary

orientation of this study. Researching the network impact on micro-firm owner/manager learning requires that the social and contextual influences on learning are also examined.

3.2.2 Learning in the micro-firm

Learning theories are vast and can be found throughout a wide range of disciplines. For the purpose of this study the author has limited consideration to those theories that are thought to be most relevant in terms of the subject under study; namely owner/manager learning in a micro-firm setting. Individual learning will be explored first, followed by an investigation of the literature on owner/manager learning in the micro-firm environment. In the latter half of the chapter the social and contextual aspects of learning are also considered.

3.2.2.1 Individual learning

In the micro-firm setting where there is little separation of ownership and power the owner/manager (the individual) is crucial to the learning process. Any change is dependent on his/her ways of seeing the world (personal construct) built up from the experience of owning and running the business. Researching individual learning in this context requires an exploration of the learning process and levels of learning (namely single and double loop learning levels, developed by Argyris and Schön, 1978). Learning preference and style will also be examined. Finally the factors which influence the success of owner/manager learning are considered, as the owner/manager is the unit of analysis in the context of this study.

3.2.2.2 Owner/manager learning in the micro-firm

Entrepreneurial learning is often an unconscious informal process which has been found to be unintentional, in most cases it is the result of a business process rather than a process in itself (Devins et al., 2005). Gibb (2002) argues there is a lack of detailed consideration of how entrepreneurs learn. Garavan and Ó'Cinnéde (1994b) therefore suggest that provisions should be entrepreneurially directed facilitating the learning process in the micro-firm environment.

As stated previously, the objectives of the micro-firm owner/manager are, in most instances the objectives of the business (Gibb, 1983). While Gibb (1983) argues that this should represent an advantage for the smaller firm in terms of the identification of learning needs, the micro-firm owner/manager, lacking a training specialist to guide the learning process may bypass the analytical process, as a result he/she will not accurately analyse learning needs. Other factors which influence the success of owner/manager learning in this setting include owner/manager autonomy, responsibility and motivation.

- **Owner/manager autonomy in the learning process**

Candy (1987) draws a distinction between autonomous learning (where the learner makes the choice to direct their own learning needs) and self direction where the learner perceives that his/her learning is self directed. Foley et al., (2007) state that learner ownership requires greater learner involvement at each stage of the learning process to ensure deeper learning. Anchor (see glossary) as a means of deepening learning is also identified as an important stage of ownership. Wyer et al. (2000) contend that even where learning is perceived as relevant a level of skill is nevertheless required by the owner/manager in order to anchor learning, therefore skill, want and need contribute to autonomous learning in this context.

- **Responsibility for learning**

Some suggest that responsibility for learning is a success factor (Jōgi and Karu, 2004; and Chaston and Badger, 1999). Jōgi and Karu (2004) further contend that where learners view themselves as receivers of learning/training, responsibility for learning remains low and does not develop after training. Previous authors have pointed out that this may not be innate and may be explained by prior fostering of learned helplessness from previous suppliers of training provisions (Candy, 1987; Sadler-Smith et al., 2000).

- **Motivation for learning**

Many have argued that motivation is an essential pre-condition for effective learning (Sadler-Smith et al., 2000; Gunnigle et al., 2002 and Foley et al. 2006). Sadler-Smith et al. (2000) contend that motivation is dependent on the perception of benefit. As discussed

previously the micro-firm owner/manager will often seek out new information when a problem arises that requires immediate resolution (Section, 2.1.1.4.1). This demonstrates a preference for learning that is immediately applicable. Patton et al. (2000) suggest that if learning/training is undertaken for more strategic motivations that it may be more likely that it will result in a behaviour change and induce double loop learning. Lifestyle maintenance is often the owner/managers primary motivation for running a small tourism business (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Lynch, 2000). They are in business to maintain this lifestyle choice rather than seeking business development for its own sake. The aspirations of these business owners have obvious consequences for learning and management development in the micro-firm setting. Levels of commitment and strategic focus will vary (Morrison, 1996). As Down (1998) contends learning in the small-firm environment need not be growth-focused, as all managers require a level of managerial competency to maintain their business regardless of their motivations for learning. As Garavan and Ó'Cinnéde (1994a) point out there are few careers that require such a range of functional knowledge and skills as that of the small business owner/manager. Therefore learning is vital for micro-firm survival and development, regardless of the entrepreneurs' motivation to own a business.

3.2.2.3 Developing the reflexive practitioner

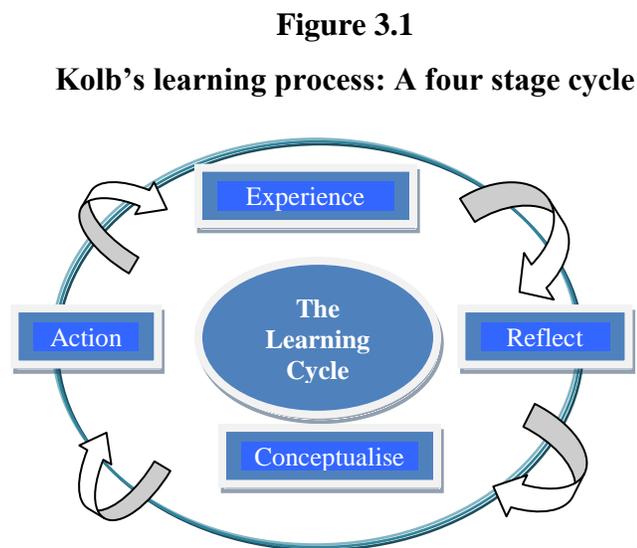
Kolb (1984) contends that four opposing abilities are required for effective learning to take place, these are: concrete experience abilities, reflective observation abilities, abstract conceptualisation abilities and finally active experimentation abilities. The learner moves through these adaptive learning modes, from actor to observer and from specific involvement to analytical detachment (Kolb, 1984). As these modes require polar opposite abilities, the learner must choose which set to use for each learning situation. The goal of the management educator is to provide relevant, applicable knowledge: '*while encouraging the reflective examination of experience that is necessary to refine old theories and build new ones*' (Kolb 1976: 25).

Kolb (1984) highlights a difficulty in developing the reflexive practitioner (see glossary) role in the micro-firm context as reflective observation is seen as a disturbance to the

process of action. Developing reflexive abilities results in the application of learning back in the business environment, as the learner gains the ability to stand back and reflect on the situation in the context of past experiences enhancing the learning capability of the individual (Sullivan, 2000).

3.2.2.4 The learning process

Kolb (1976) perceives learning as a tension and conflict filled process, where individual learning occurs through confrontation among four modes of learning which are illustrated below in Figure 3.1. This model is based on learning through experience and is therefore particularly relevant in this context, considering the value that adult learners place upon learning from their experience.



Adapted from Kolb (1976)

In the first stage of Kolb's model, learners must be able to fully involve themselves without bias to the learning experience, Kolb refers to this stage as concrete experience. As the learning cycle is a process where ideas and habits should be modified as a result of experience (Kolb, 1976) it involves transactions between the person and their environment. The owner/manager adjusts to the environment and the learning experience and changes in behaviour result (Deakins and Freel, 1998).

Reflective observation is the second stage of the model and refers to the ability to reflect on that experience from many different perspectives. Many other authors in the research field of small-firm learning have commented on the importance of reflection in the learning process namely Garavan and Ó'Cinnéde (1994b); Sullivan (2000) and Schaper et al, (2005). Garavan and Cinnéde (1994a: 10) point out that “*action in the absence of reflection precludes learning*”. Lawless et al. (2000) contend that there is a need to involve the learner and allow for reflection on the applicability of theory to their own environment. The learning process then becomes transformed and aids adult learners to:

“...construe their experience in a way which they can more clearly understand the reasons for their problems and understand the options open to them so that they may assume responsibility for decision making” (Gregory, 1994: 47).

Gorli (2003) contends that this reflective stage of the process can occur on an individual or peer basis.

Abstract conceptualisation is the third stage of the model and refers to the ability of the individual to create concepts which integrate the learner's observations into sound theories, resulting in deeper understanding. Lastly through active experimentation these theories are used to solve problems and make decisions. Kelly (1955: 304) contends that action is an example of the learner putting his/her ideas to work, at this point in the process it can be said that learning has taken place, as learning is applied.

Kolb (1984) describes the active/reflective dimension of learning as one of the major dimensions of learning. It is well written throughout the literature that the micro-firm owner/manager has a preference for activity-based learning (Lawless et al., 2000; Chouke and Armstrong, 1998 among others) viewing reflection as a disturbance to action (Section, 3.2.2.3 p.33). According to Kolb (1984) the way that conflicts between the ‘*dialectically opposed modes of adaption*’ become resolved is a determination of the level of learning achieved.

Kolb's (1976) experiential learning model recognises the important role that experience plays in the learning process. Chouke and Armstrong (1998) also recognise past experience as a major source of small-firm learning while Gibb (1997) argues that experiential learning demands an action learning approach. It is because adult learners demand that the relevance and application of ideas be tested against their own experience and wisdom that Kolb (1976) suggests the need to integrate the best of traditional methods with experiential methods such as apprenticeships and cooperative education. Kolb (1976: 25) also asserts that improvement in management education will arise through the integration of scholarly and practical learning styles.

It is clear then from the above discussion that learning as a concept will encompass an individual's learning style. Where preference exists for a particular style, levels of learning will be determined by the mode employed by the individual to resolve these conflicts. Learning levels will now be discussed and subsequently learning styles and their influence on the process.

3.2.2.5 Learning levels

Argyris (1997) contends that learning occurs on at least three different levels, single loop, double loop and triple loop learning. The first two levels of learning are relevant for the purpose of this research and will be examined now in more depth. Single loop learning can be described as the most basic form of learning encompassing the identification of a problem followed by corrective action taken to resolve the problem on the part of the learner. According to Argyris and Schön (1996) at this level, the primary concern is the achievement of goals and objectives, while performance specified by the existing values and norms remain unchanged. This level of learning also equates to what Marton and Saljos (1976) term 'surface learning' and in the context of Kolb's (1976) learning cycle it represents experience without reflection and therefore cannot be considered learning.

In contrast to single loop learning, where values and norms become modified double loop learning exists. By challenging the nature of the problem and redefining it, changes occur in basic assumptions and core values. Therefore in trying to distinguish between occurrences

of single or double loop learning it is important to note where inquiry goes, and not just where it begins. Double loop learning in the micro-firm context is a difficult process as the existing norms of the owner/manager and the business may be tacit (Kelliher, 2006) as such they may remain unidentified and unarticulated.

Learning from experience relies upon drawing from previous constructs of an event (Kelly, 1955), in other words the ability to reflect as mentioned previously in Kolb's (1976) learning model. Revans (1982) contends that lasting change in behaviour (the relevant learning orientation in this study), is more likely to occur from the reinterpretation of past experiences. Change in behaviour has been previously identified as an integral part of double loop learning (Section 3.2.2.4). Greenbank (2000) raises a point which required consideration in this context; an owner/manager's reliance on their own experience means that they are at the mercy of its quality and appropriateness and also their willingness to reflect upon and analyse the information that has been absorbed.

Foldy and Creed (1999) suggest that learning progresses from single to double loop and Beckwith (1991 in Reynolds 1997), asserts that it should be possible to encourage a deep approach by ensuring relevance and providing an opportunity for the learner to manage his/her own learning.

3.2.2.6 Learning styles

Training developed to facilitate learning styles it is more likely to convert into changed behaviour. Kolb (1984: 67) defines learning style as the differences in learning orientations based on which of the four modes of learning process (outlined above in Figure 3.1) that individuals emphasise. As discussed previously micro-firm managerial learning styles are characterised by strong active experimentation skills but tend to be weak on reflective observation skills, Kolb (1976) argues that for effective learning to take place, both of these roles require development.

Individuals develop learning styles with both weak and strong points, Kolb (1976) argues that understanding these strengths and weaknesses aids in the application of learning and

provides a framework for continued learning on the job. Notably the value of focusing on learning styles has been criticised by many including Laurillard (1979) and Reynolds (1997), who both argue that focusing on individual learning styles leaves little room for the learning context to be considered.

Sadler-Smith et al. (2000: 247) refer to Cross (1976: 111) who comments that matching learning styles can be maladaptive, suggesting that exposing the learner to different styles may result in the development of a weaker learning style. Reynolds (1997) contends that an alternative approach would be to encourage learners to reflect upon what learning means to them.

3.2.2.7 The learning preference of the micro-firm owner/manager

Learning preference is defined as an individual's disposition towards a particular mode of learning (Sadler-Smith et al., 2000). It is widely written that small businesses and adults have a preference for activity-based learning (Lawless et al., 2000; Choueke and Armstrong, 1998 among others).

In Choueke and Armstrong, (1998: 8) Burgoyne (1995) defines learning from experience as the knowledge that is learned through the interpretation of the experience as opposed to the absorption of previously created knowledge, shaped by collective learning in social contexts rather than individual learning from concrete experience. Indeed the value of collective learning, particularly when seeking double loop learning has been previously confirmed (Kelliher, 2006: 62). The concept of learning is also correlated to action (Argyris, 1997). However it is important to reiterate that action without reflection does not equate to learning. Action learning theory puts forward the notion that individuals will learn from focusing on organisational settings within a framework of enquiry which challenges and encourages (Gregory, 1994). The network impact on individual learning will be explored in section 3.5, p.41.

3.3 Management development - A micro-firm perspective

Management development in the micro-firm context is an important consideration with regard to this study, as the focus of the research is owner/manager learning. Previous research shows that size (particularly that of the micro-firm) is also a determinant of management development in small businesses (Thomson and Gray, 1999).

O’ Dwyer and Ryan (2000) emphasise the importance of management development in the micro-firm setting emphasising that the development of the owner/manager is tantamount with the development of the business, a notion supported by Devins et al. (2005). Although previous researchers have mentioned the importance of a more formal approach to management development (for example the use of a formal written document) evidence has shown that micro-firms do not have sufficient structures to merit a systematic approach to management development (Thomson and Gray, 1999). According to O’Dwyer and Ryan (2000) the perception may exist that participation in management development programmes does not equate to management development and to business development. This perception can be challenged by encouraging a strategic outlook.

Micro-firm managers view themselves primarily as business people not managers and their perception of traditional management development programmes could be described as sceptical at best. They are willing to engage in learning and development that improves their personal skills and as a result improves the business (O’Dwyer and Ryan, 2000), but they may seek an unrealistic/ speedy return for this investment.

3.4 Micro-firm training approach

The approach to training in the micro-firm has been described by many as an ‘ad hoc’ approach (Lange et al., 2000). The unique characteristics of the micro-firm demand an approach to training that encompasses flexibility from supply side interventions. Lange et al. (2000) further assert that training is not viewed as a continuous process of development in the micro-firm setting, citing resource constraints (human and time) as a barrier to learning (See Chapter 2; Section 2.1.2, p.18). This makes formal learning interventions a luxury that most micro-firm owner/managers simply cannot afford.

Where training does occur it needs to be immediately applicable (Schaper et al., 2005) with owner/managers displaying a preference for training which provides developmental education (Schaper et al., 2005; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000). It is important to note that the activity of learning is not limited to training programmes (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004), although training is viewed as a vehicle for learning it does not necessarily equate to learning.

It is useful at this point to tabulate learning, training and development issues from a micro-firm owner/manager perspective before moving on to explore the network impact on the owner/manager's individual learning. These issues are outlined below in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2
Learning, training and development issues in the micro-firm

Criteria	Aspect of learning	Impact on learning
Formal management development	Unlikely in micro-firm setting	Little opportunity for formal developmental learning and business development
Training	Needs to be immediately applicable and add value	Does not equate to learning
Learning	Unconscious informal process	Single loop learning
	Reactive in nature	Crisis management
	Analytical process bypassed	Learning needs are unidentified Learner isolation
	Existing norms are unidentified and unarticulated	Tacit knowledge
	Poor reflexive capabilities	Action emphasis Surface learning

3.5 Micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment

Many authors whom have researched the topic of improving learning in the small-firm have highlighted the importance of understanding the contextualised learning environment (Down, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore it is felt that a comprehensive understanding of small-firm learning, demands consideration of the contextual aspects within which that learning takes place. In the case of this research, this context is the network environment, this will be explored next.

3.6 Network activity as a catalyst for micro-firm learning and success

Throughout the literature learning is viewed as a process which occurs through a social practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Gibb (2006) argues that the owner/managers' ability to learn from stakeholders and embed this learning in business development is the key to small-firm survival and growth. Collaboration is therefore an important component of the learning process in this context (Schrage, 1991) as quoted in (Lawless, et al, 2000).

The importance of network-centred learning has been acknowledged in a number of studies (Devins et al., 2005; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Down, 1999; Chaston and Baker, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1988) assert that learning emerges from networks of relations, while Johannisson (2000) contends that the level and sophistication of networking affects the quality of experiential learning. Down (1999: 270) referring to the work of Shaw (1995) argues that if networks are socially constructed then learning may also be. Gibb (1997) reasons that improving the development of small businesses requires the competency of the network as well as the competency of the businesses involved in that network (the learning set). Gregory (1994) argues that 'the learning set' is of value in terms of enabling and enhancing individual learning on a number of levels. Although Gregory (1994) refers to learning in the 'set' (Revans, 1982) the focus is nonetheless on the individuals in that set, encompassing the notion of learner interdependency. Down (1999) argues that if a small-firm is integrated particularly through information exchange relations with other firms that have different knowledge contexts and resources then the potential for enhanced learning might be improved.

The function of the learning set is to enable the set members to learn from the link between ideas and experience; to generalise from the past and plan for the future. As discussed previously, micro-businesses do not have resources to buy in or develop specialist knowledge (Chapter 2, Section 2.1.2.3, p.21) yet they are under mounting pressure to

comply with ever-increasing regulation, and other external environmental issues (Table 2.2, p.24). Networks could assist in combating this issue by providing a means for participants to acquire information and resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them (Witt, 2004; National Commission on Entrepreneurship, 2006). Dissemination of knowledge through conversation and interaction among individuals (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1998) is also an informal benefit and an outcome of relationship interaction in this type of learning environment.

3.7 Learning relationships in a network environment

Much of the literature agrees that small business needs to be supported and nurtured however Chaston and Baker (1998) assert that successful learning relationships are not understood by the stakeholders or organisations that support them. Hannon et al., (2000) reason that if the success of the business is dependent on the firm's ability to learn, then effective relationships will contribute to the firm's survival and success. But what defines an effective learning relationship? Hannon et al., (2000) and Gibb (2006) argue that improving the efficiency and effectiveness of stakeholder learning relationships require an understanding of relationship dynamics and their management. While there are numerous variables in relationship management, the key learning relationships in the network environment are considered briefly in the context of micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment. These relationships have been outlined in the conceptual framework (Section 5.4, Fig. 5.2, p.70), to reiterate the key relationships are as follows:

- Provider and participant 3.7.1
- Peer-to-peer 3.7.2
- Trainer/ Facilitator and participant 3.7.3

These are now briefly examined in the context of facilitating micro-firm individual owner/manager learning as outlined in the overall research objective.

3.7.1 Provider and Participant

Timing, location and content of training have all been cited as inadequate in previous training provisions to small-firms. Levels of control and the degree of resource dependency

have also been cited as variables in the effectiveness of this participant provider relationship (Patton et al., 2000: 20). Patton et al. (2000) contend that owner managers require resources to translate new knowledge and skills back to the business. They also point out that responsibility for learning transfer does not lie solely with the owner/manager. This point is summed up in the following quote:

These issues are not the sole province of the interaction process but integrate with the individual structures, systems and personalities of those providing and those receiving training. In any relationship there are factors that are specific to either party that limit or promote the successful development of that relationship (Patton et al., 2000: 20)

Lave and Wenger's (1991) social learning theory is apt considering the context of this research as it looks at types of social engagement that facilitate learning. They assert that active participation in communities of practice (such as a learning network) is a social process that '*... includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills*', (p 29).

Lave and Wenger's social learning theory is characterised by four components, these are meaning, practice, community and identity. From an individual learning perspective this theory of learning requires that participants engage in and contribute to the practices of that community. Other factors in the success of this relationship include owner/manager autonomy, responsibility and motivation (See section 3.2.2.2, p.31). Indeed these factors influence the success of all of the key learning relationships outlined.

3.7.2 Peer-to-peer

Wenger (2008) contends that the peer-to-peer learning activities found in communities of practice offer an alternative learning opportunity than more traditional offerings. Schrage, (1991) cited in Lawless et al., (2000: 7) highlights the importance of collaboration in learning and argues that a group may share ideas but unless these are used to enhance the learning of others in the group the opportunity for collaborative learning is lost. The NCEO (2006) recommended that training and education programmes should be implemented with

advice from and sometimes in partnership with entrepreneurial businesses in the region. Gibb (2006) maintains that owner/managers must seek to maximise the opportunity to educate stakeholders. Generative learning refers to the ability to bring forward an experience and not just to wait for and learn from it, and it can be very beneficial in a network setting by bringing forward the learning of other stakeholders (Senge, 1990).

Hannon et al. (2000) point out the intangible assets that may be exchanged in learning relationships, these include experience, tacit learning and insights into good practice and problem solving. Lave and Wenger (1991) look at the kinds of social interactions that provide the context and opportunity for learning to take place (1991: 14). Therefore it is not the case that learners acquire structures or models to understand the world, but they participate in frameworks (contexts) that already have structure.

3.7.3 Trainer/facilitator to participant

In a trainer/ developmental role previous experience, expertise and credibility have been found to be demanded by small-firm owner/managers (Lawless et al., 2000; O' Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Matlay, 1999). Trainers must take account different levels of knowledge, experience and competence within the learning set. A lack of clear objectives and resource constraints in the micro-firm setting also needs to be kept in mind when delivering training and/or providing facilitation to this business group.

3.8 Summary of network impact on micro-firm owner/manager learning

The network impact on micro-firm owner/manager learning is tabulated below.

Table 3.3

Network impact on micro-firm owner/manager learning

Learning structures in a community of practice				
Criteria	Individual aspect	Network influence	Impact	Requirement
Action learning emphasis	Learning through experience	Shaped by collective learning Facilitated through learning structures	Information and resource exchange assist long term planning and development	Engagement and contribution
Relevance	Relate back to environment	Provides different contexts	Anchor learning	Reflection
Learning relationships in a community of practice				
Criteria	Individual aspect	Network influence	Impact	Requirement
Peer impact	Enable and enhance individual learning	Share experiences and activities Challenge and enquire	Norms and experiences modified	Collaboration Open to change
Learner autonomy	Develop learning and problem solving competency	Ability to reflect	Changed points of view and behaviour	Learner role duality Reflexive practitioner

3.9 Key themes from the literature review

Having explored the literature review and tabulated the key themes in relation to the micro-firm (Table 2.2, p.24), learning (Table 3.2, p.40) and network impact on micro/firm owner/manager learning (Table 3.3, p.46), a number of factors are revealed that impact owner/manager learning in the micro-firm network setting. These key themes have been tabulated in Table 3.4.

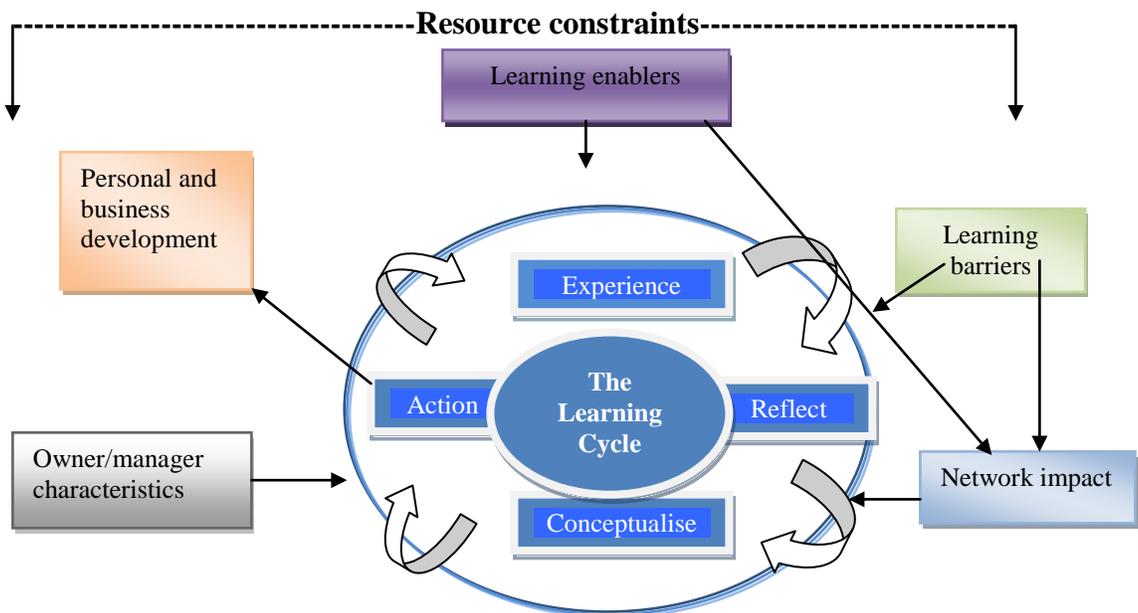
Table 3.4
Key themes from literature review

Theme	Criteria	Influence/Impact
Micro-firm owner/manager characteristics	Informal Planner Poor analytical skills Opportunistic and intuitive	No identification or analysis of learning needs Crisis management Value business experience
Resource Constraints	Time Limited Human Resources Financial	Immediately applicable learning is valued Little opportunity for developmental learning No expertise (learning requirements) Little impetus for developmental activity Little investment in learning and training Need to see immediate value added
Learning Barriers	Owner/manager inability to reflect Established management practice, views and norms Low autonomy/ responsibility Perception of relevance of subject/ material Learning structures Ineffective learning relationships	No reflection no action Not open to change Learned helplessness Low levels of engagement in the learning process Reinforce learned helplessness Reliance on informal information to aid decision making
Learning Enablers	Learning tools to aid reflection Learning structures Effective learning network relationships	Reflexive practitioner role developed Increased ownership of the learning process Facilitate and enhance individual learning in the network setting
Network Impact	Learning structures Stakeholder learning relationships	Engagement, contribution Reflection and anchor Share different knowledge contexts and resources Challenge and enquire

These themes informed the subsequent framework (objective 4). Kolb's (1976) learning model offers a useful starting point from which the framework for owner/manager learning can be developed, as it outlines the individual learning cycle. Kolb's model was adapted to

show the relationship between individual micro-firm owner/manager learning and the impact of the network environment on that learning, as informed by the relevant literature (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2
A framework for owner/manager learning in a micro-business environment



Gibb (1997) argues that the traditional approach to learning de-contextualises it and results in managers lacking the ability to use their knowledge in order to improve performance. According to some the challenge is to raise the managers' ability to learn better from experience (Hannon et al., 2000) demanding an action learning approach (Kolb et al., 1986). Owner/managers are primarily interested in learning that has a focus on performance rather than analysis or planning. Their concern for survival linked with the need for immediately applicable learning leads to what Lawless et al. (2000) term a 'crisis driven approach' to learning. Consequently small-firm training needs are unplanned and are dealt with when they arise, and training is viewed as something that happens as a result of necessity and not as a developmental process. Schaper et al. (2005) also point out that there is danger in trying to adopt a formal learning approach for this business cohort.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that learning is not limited to training programmes or to the individual owner/manager. Previous research has already established that formal training programmes do not meet the diverse needs of small and micro-firms. Many suggest that a move towards learning networks is required to develop the competencies small-firms require to survive in today's competitive environment. Networking has been found to be a valuable programme element for entrepreneurs, positively influencing business performance and success. This chapter has explored learning, reflective practice and network learning in pursuit of the research objectives of this study.

Issues highlighted in this chapter will have an impact upon the success of the network in terms of learning. At a minimum the owner/manager needs to be motivated to learn and involved in each stage of the learning process. The success of the learning relationships within the network environment is dependent on a number of variables. These variables place responsibility for effective owner/manager learning with all the relevant stakeholders in the learning network.

As the network in the context of this study is an Irish tourism-business learning network, the next chapter provides an outline of the context within which Irish micro tourism-businesses operate.

Chapter 4

The Irish tourism sector

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the unique context in which micro tourism firms operate. Haber and Reichel, (2005) assert that as tourism is an industry that includes a broad range of services and activities it could be argued that an industry specific analysis would be beneficial.

This chapter will firstly provide an overview of the Irish tourism sector. The tourism business environment is then considered and subsequently the contribution of the tourism sector to the economy and the wider society are outlined.

The future for the Irish tourism sector is then considered paying emphasis to learning training and development issues and challenges of micro-firm owner/managers. As the catalyst for learning in the context of this research is the Fáilte Ireland CBTLN programme, an overview of the role of Fáilte Ireland and the CBTLN is provided. This is followed by details of the CBTLN south and south east programme and its stakeholders.

4.1 The Irish tourism sector overview- A micro-firm perspective

Tourism is the largest and most important component of indigenous industry within the Irish economy according to Fáilte Ireland's Strategy Statement (2005-2007). Ireland had over 7 million visitors in 2006 with an estimated expenditure of €4.7bn. The importance of the role that micro-firms play in the tourism sector has only begun to emerge in the last few years. Thomas and Thomas (2006) accentuated the role that micro-firms play in shaping the tourist experience and influencing the development and reputation of tourist destinations, while Morrison and Teixeira (2004) emphasise the importance of micro-firms in maintaining the future market for tourism. It was estimated in 2005 that tourism employs 8.1 per cent of the economical active population of the state (HRD). Tourism employs people from a diverse range of businesses types and these people have a diverse range of skills and backgrounds reflective of the complexities of the tourism product demanded from the customer.

Ireland outperformed its European counterparts in the 1990s but has become less competitive over the last decade in the tourism context. Therefore remaining competitive requires the improvement of the '*quality and appeal of the tourism product*' (Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Product Development Strategy, 2007-2013: 1). The development of the tourism product relies on the people that deliver the product, this is acknowledged in the strategy where expanding the skills, competencies and capabilities of the people involved in delivering the tourism product is outlined as key. This is not without its challenges however as the learning needs of this diverse cohort are highly differentiated. Coupled with severe resource constraints and a suspicion of formal academic training, meeting the learning needs of small and micro-tourism business providers is a major challenge.

In total the sector comprises 16,500 enterprises (Fáilte Ireland HRD Strategy, 2005). The sector is collectively made up of a wide range of small enterprises which are predominantly (over ninety per cent) micro-firms. The tourism sector comprises a wide range of different business types ranging from what are termed 'core tourism businesses' such as accommodation providers and tourism services and attractions. Other tourism related business types include restaurants and licensed premises. Fáilte Irelands, HRD Strategy,

2004, 'Competing through people: A human resource development strategy for Irish tourism', rightly identifies diversity as one of the defining features of the Irish tourism industry.

The performance of Ireland as a tourism destination while strong is becoming increasingly competitive. Europe is set to represent a diminishing share of the global tourism market, within Europe Ireland is competing to keep costs under control as inflation and wage costs among other costs rise (Comhar Report, 2006). Small tourism businesses are under pressure to compete constructively according to Foley et al. (2007). At national level these firms make an important contribution to the economy and society. This contribution will be discussed next.

Small business plays a very important role in the Irish economy and in society, a role that must be supported to ensure continued economic growth and success. The micro-firm has an important socio-economic role to play at a local, regional and national level. Census data (CSO, 2005) reveals that there are 216,000 micro businesses in Ireland, and that in indigenous industry small business contributed one third of total gross value added (GVA). The Comhar Report (2006) outlined four major benefits of tourism activity to the economy; these are additions to the level of consumer spending which in turn creates business for many other enterprises. It creates and supports employment across the economy. It stabilises the balance of payments and generates new streams of tax revenue. Since 1995 total foreign exchange earnings have increased by fifty-one per cent. It is estimated that fifty two cent from every Euro spent by out of state visitors ends up with the government (Fáilte Ireland HRD Strategy, 2005).

Fáilte Ireland's Strategy Statement (2005-2007) acknowledges the important role that tourism plays in developing rural economies and contributing to spatial balance. Previous research concurs that micro businesses enhance the economic development of the regions in which they operate (Lean, 1998; Irvine and Anderson, 2004) particularly through the local business relationships with suppliers and markets. At a local level micro tourism businesses

often provide employment where it would otherwise be limited³. This cohort often represents the needs and interests of the local communities in which they operate.

The Report of the Small Business Forum, (2006) highlighted a weakness in Irish entrepreneurship performance stating that the main difference between Ireland and other entrepreneurial countries is that our proportion of nascent entrepreneurs⁴ is much lower. This statistic is mirrored in micro-tourism firms where the majority are not growth focused (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000) as cited in the literature review. Smaller firms are characterised by a lack of growth (Devins et al., 2005). It is precisely for this reason that researchers have suggested that the micro-firm has been neglected from an academic and policy perspective (Cressey and Storey, 1995).

4.2 Learning, training and development in the Irish tourism sector

The contrasting nature of tourism businesses provides a major learning and training challenge for providers in Ireland, this is reflected world-wide (Becton and Graetz, 2001). Owner/managers of micro-tourism firms perceive practical experience as more relevant than formal education (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), indeed relatively few have been found to have formal education (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Hannon et al, 2000; Smallbone, 1990).

Fáilte Ireland's HRD strategy (2005) also highlighted the difficulties faced by smaller firms which hinder their access to developmental learning and management development hence they struggle to provide an environment where developmental learning occurs. Resource poverty is a key barrier to learning in the tourism sector where constrained resources result in gaps in managerial competencies (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004).

Several key government reports regarding learning, training and development in this setting have been discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter (Section 3.1, p. 28). They reflect the importance of learning in the micro-firm sector and also outline many of the

³ National Tourism Policy Review of Ireland, OECD (June 2004) pg 6

⁴ Nascent entrepreneur refers to entrepreneurs at an advanced phase of business.

challenges faced by policy makers and providers of training and management education to this cohort. These reports include:

- The National Tourism Policy Review report (2004) - recognised the important role that the government had to play in supporting the enhancement of business capability and capacity of owner-operated small scale tourism businesses.
- The Enterprise Strategy Group Report 'Ahead of the Curve- Ireland's Place in The Global Economy' (2004) - cited the effective development of management capability in the small-firm context as an essential condition for sustainable enterprise.
- Fáilte Ireland's HRD strategy (2005) - recommends that small business owner/managers participate in learning networks to enhance their skills and achieve a premium tourism product.
- Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2006) - highlights many problems with traditional approaches including the failure to take account of entrepreneurial education demands.
- The Tourism Product Development Strategy (2007-2013) - acknowledges management capability and business development as essential components in the delivery of a successful tourism product.

4.3 Fáilte Ireland County Based Tourism Learning Networks

Fáilte Ireland is the national body responsible for the development of the Irish Tourism industry. The County Based Tourism Learning Networks (CBTLN) were established in 2006 as a response to Fáilte Irelands Human Resource Development Strategy 2005-2010. This initiative reflected a coordinated and collaborative approach which represented a marked departure from government and academic initiatives criticised previously (Perren, 1998 and Matlay, 1999). The School of Business at WIT was awarded the contract to design and manage the CBTLN south and south east in 2006.

4.3.1 The south and south east CBTLN

The CBTLN south and south east has been developed by WIT Business School in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland to provide tourism-related businesses with a substantial business development programme while also developing a closer relationship with specific industry sectors. The following background to the CBTLN programme is demonstrative of the role which Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) plays in the context of social capital development among independent businesses in Ireland's south east.

Understanding that access to education and training is a major barrier to professional development within the industry and in a response to market demand; CBTLN has been designed to make management and company development accessible and affordable while providing a flexible, action-orientated model of learning which addresses the particular challenges and learning barriers faced by SME and micro tourism enterprises. Foley et al. (2006) contend that the focus of this action learning ethos enables individual participants to take control of the learning activity.

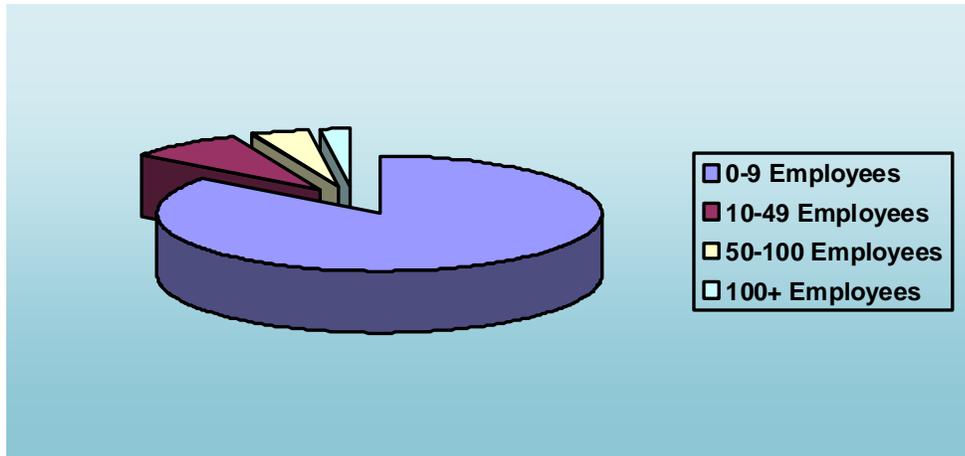
The CBTLN has witnessed active involvement from small tourism business in the south and south east region since it was established in 2006. The numbers of participants that have participated on the programme since 2006 are as follows:

- 2006- 136 participants
- 2007- 139 participants
- 2008 – 161 participants

The majority of these participants are owner/managers of micro-firms (eighty one per cent). Table 4.1 shows the breakdown by number of employees of the 2007 CBTLN south and south east programme members.

Table 4.1

Employee numbers in participant businesses in the south and south east CBTLN



The catalyst for learning in the context of this research is the CBTLN programme. Established in 2006, the programme was adapted from the small-firm learning network model by Foley et al. (2006). Based on an action learning ethos the programme comprises learning sets (local network groups) a web community and various learning interventions.

4.3.1.1 Stakeholders of the south and south east CBTLN

The CBTLN south and south east programme has several key stakeholders; these have been outlined in the conceptual framework (Chapter 5, section 4, p. 70). In the context of this study the stakeholders comprise academic staff, participants and the CBTLN support team. These stakeholder roles are briefly outlined below with further detail provided in Appendix A, Table A.A.1.

4.3.1.1.1 Academic staff

A number of the academic employees of Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) are involved in the programme through supervision of research studies and learning facilitation. There are also 3 research assistants registered for masters in business and PhD.

4.3.1.1.2 CBTLN support team

The support team comprises the programme manager, two programme administrators, (one based in CIT, Cork) a projects coordinator and three research assistants. The support team provides a one-stop consultation and information hub (Foley et al, 2007).

4.3.1.1.3 Facilitator

A trained facilitator is matched to each LN group. The facilitators assist participants with their learning needs and work through the Tourism Business Development Plan (TBDP) over the term of the programme. Previous research would suggest, that as a group micro-firms are not homogeneous in relation to learning (Devins et al., 2005), as such their learning needs are highly differentiated (Gibb, 1983).

4.3.1.2 Accreditation - Certificate in Tourism Business Practice

In 2007 the programme was awarded certification the equivalent of HETAC level 6 award and on completion participants qualified with a Certificate in Tourism Business Practice. The criteria for accreditation include the completion and submission of a number of key learning documents. These documents include a Learning Needs analysis (LNA), Tourism Business Development Plan (TBDP), Health and Safety Checklist and a Regulatory Checklist. Details of these documents can be viewed in Appendix A, section A.2. Other criteria also need to be fulfilled, a minimum attendance must be met and individual evaluations from CBTLN learning interventions are also included for submission.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the Irish tourism sector from a micro-firm perspective. The chapter outlined the importance of the micro- tourism firm to the Irish economy and society. It is argued that as micro-firms play a vital role in shaping the tourist experience, maintaining the future market for tourism relies on the success of these businesses. This chapter also highlighted the need for the tourism sector to rebuild competitiveness through management capability development.

The CBTLN south and south east was the learning catalyst in the context of this study. The next chapter seeks to examine theoretical and conceptual factors, which influenced the research design. The rationale for the chosen research methodology is also discussed.

Chapter 5

Research Methodology

5.0 Introduction

Previous chapters explored the relevant literature in relation to the micro-firm, networking and owner/manager learning. Chapter 4 provided an overview of the Irish tourism sector and the CBTLN. This chapter will seek to examine theoretical and conceptual factors, which influenced the research design. The rationale for the chosen research methodology is then discussed. Methodological philosophies will be debated and approaches to data collection and associated techniques will be discussed.

5.1 Overall objective of the research

The principal objective of this research is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment. The network under study for the purpose of this research is the Fáilte Ireland county based tourism learning network (CBTLN). An overview of this CBTLN is provided in Chapter 4. This research objective arose as a result of the researcher immersing herself into the CBTLN whilst simultaneously reviewing the relevant literature, searching for main themes and gaps in the context of micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment (See Table 2.2, p.24 and Table 3.3, p. 46). This approach allowed the researcher to clarify research questions, which provided a clear statement of the issues that would be investigated (Brannick and Roche, 1997). These issues are now discussed.

The literature review reveals that there is insufficient knowledge regarding learning in the micro-firm environment (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Crossan et al., 1999; O' Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Schaper and Campo, 2005; Devins et al., 2005) particularly from a network perspective. There is no research to date on this topic within the tourism sector in the south and south east region of Ireland despite requests for sector specific research (Chaston et al., 1999; Burrows and Curran, 1989) into micro-firm learning. Research highlights that too little is known about how learning between small-firms and their stakeholders takes place in the tourism context (Thomas and Thomas, 2006), how learning transfer takes place and even less about how knowledge becomes embedded in the micro-firm environment. This view is supported by Chaston and Baker (1998), who assert that successful learning relationships are not understood by the stakeholders or organisations that support them, while Gibb (2002) further argues that there is a lack of detailed consideration of how entrepreneurs learn. Finally there is also a literature gap regarding management development and the learning preferences of owner/managers in the micro-firm (Devins et al., 2005).

While literature shows that learning from others is one of the primary motivations for network participation, the affect of working closely with peers is often not realised or reported (Rosenfeld, 1996). Malewicki (2005) states that there also appears to be little research in the area of enhancing and supporting member longevity within the network

setting. Gibb (1997) argues that improving the development of small business requires the competency of the network as well as the competency of the businesses involved, and the NCEO (2006) recommended that training and education programmes should be implemented with advice from and sometimes in partnership with entrepreneurial businesses in the region.

Based on these findings, there is an identified literature gap in relation to micro-firm learning, specifically within the tourism sector. There appears to be little knowledge about the learning preferences of micro-firm owner/managers and little research in relation to networks as successful learning environments for this business cohort. This gap has led to the establishment of the research objectives of the study.

5.1.1 Research objectives

Objectives provide a clear understanding of the purpose of the study and assist in the direction and investigation of the research (Emory and Cooper, 1991). The research objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment.
2. To examine the relationship between learning acquired and learning impact – changes which become embedded in the business.
3. To analyse the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the network.
4. To propose a framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment.

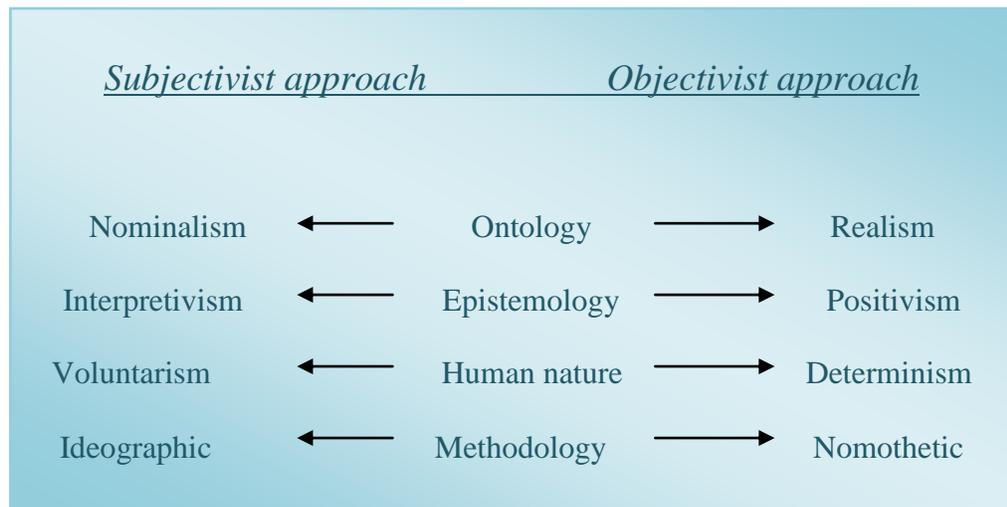
5.2 Philosophical perspectives

Philosophical perspectives relate to assumptions about the social world and how it can be investigated. Two main perspectives/dimensions exist, the nature of society and the nature of science (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). All approaches to social research are based on interrelated assumptions that underpin social science, these assumptions influence the methodology employed by researchers.

Science, the second dimension, involves the subjective or objective approach to research. These philosophical assumptions are often depicted as standing in polar opposition to one another. The value of this type of depiction is that it permits comparison between the different research traditions. It is important to note that a number of intermediate philosophical positions lie between these extremes and both the subjective and objective approach are defined by the key assumptions (Figure 5.1). The research assumptions relating to ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology are outlined next.

Figure 5.1

Research method assumptions – The subjective/objective dimension



Source: Burrell and Morgan (1979)

5.2.1 The Ontological perspective

The first assumption relates to the reality of the phenomenon being investigated. Relating to what can and does exist; an ontological stance conveys what the individual believes regarding social and physical reality (Chua, 1986). Holden and Lynch (2004: 399) suggest that the researchers' view of ontology '*is the cornerstone to all other assumptions*'. Ontology is depicted above with two opposing viewpoints, nominalism and realism. Nominalists view the social world as being created by the individuals concerned (De Burca, 1995). Conversely realists hold the view that a single reality exists, a hard and knowable reality that exists independently of an individual's appreciation of it (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:4). Kolb (1976) suggests that the learning cycle is best conceived as a process where ideas and habits should be modified as a result of experience, leaning towards the behaviourist perspective. A holistic approach is therefore required that takes into account the emotions, values and interests of learners. Considering these perspectives, a nominalist ontology is apparent in this research study in light of the subject matter and identified objectives.

5.2.2 The epistemological perspective

Epistemology refers to assumptions about knowledge, how it can be obtained and how it can be communicated to others (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Extreme views in the epistemological debate relate to whether knowledge can be acquired (positivism) or if it has to be personally experienced (interpretivism) by the individual. As learning and knowledge are related processes, Kolb (1984) highlights a requirement for epistemological enquiry in relation to learning. Gibb (2002: 255) argues that moving away from cognitive notions of learning towards the recognition of the importance of emotions, feelings and motivation in the learning process is a fundamental epistemological challenge. Epistemology also assumes two viewpoints: interpretivism and positivism.

5.2.2.1 Positivism

The ontological assumption underlying positivism is that an unchanging objective reality exists which should be measured using objective methods. The assumption is that the researcher is independent of the phenomenon under study. Remenyi et al. (1998) argue that

through positivism's need to generalise it is not an approach that leads to profound insights into complex problems. A feature of positivism is that researchers are detached, maintaining a distance between themselves and the phenomenon under study (Gummesson, 1991). This research study necessitates closeness to the phenomenon, which is at variance with positivist assumptions (a view supported by Hill and McGowan, 1991).

5.2.2.2 Interpretivism

With interpretivism comes a belief that reality is socially constructed and therefore it can only be understood in context. Interpretivists argue that the researcher must be involved in the phenomenon under study. For the purpose of this study the researcher was immersed in the subject environment in order to identify the research question and objectives. The author is therefore the research instrument and this study is interpretivist in nature.

Context plays a key role in the interpretivist approach (Remenyi et al., 1998) and from a learning perspective previous authors have highlighted the importance of context (Down, 1999). Lave and Wenger (1988) posit that learning emerges as a result of participation in communities of practice (see glossary for details) suggesting that learning occurs as a result of relations between people and practice (Gibb, 1992). This epistemological perspective is congruent with the nature of this study; as such it has influenced the chosen methodology, which is outlined in section 5.3 p. 68.

5.2.3 The human nature perspective

This assumption relates to the relationship between human beings and their environment. The two opposing positions in this regard are determinism and voluntarism. Positivists hold the view that the relationship is deterministic in other words; it is determined by external forces operating in that environment (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that free will plays a role in that relationship. While the environment (context) influences learning (Lave and Wenger, 1988; Brown and Duguid, 1991), it is also individual to each learner (Kelly, 1955) and their perceptions, motivations and level of engagement (Kolb, 1976). Research from an interpretive stance concentrates on understanding and interpretation (Gummesson, 1991). As learning is context specific, it

requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the environment allowing them to gain the perspective of those situated in that environment. Indeed Down (1999) highlighted the importance of gaining a contextualised understanding of the micro-firm learning environment.

5.2.4 The methodological perspective

The final assumption discussed is methodology and it represents the means available to research the phenomenon being studied. The researcher’s methodological choice will therefore be affected by their position in relation to ontology, epistemology and human nature, resulting in either an objective or subjective approach to research.

5.2.4.1 Research methods

Jankowicz (1991: 158) describes a method as ‘*a systematic and orderly approach taken towards the collection of data so that information can be obtained from those data*’. There are two main approaches to research: qualitative and quantitative. While techniques are mainly qualitative or quantitative, no method is entirely either (Patton, 1990; Jankowicz, 1991). Some argue that the main difference between the two is the method of measurement/collection (Hakim, 2000), differences also exist ontologically and epistemologically. Table 5.1 below outlines some of the main distinctions between qualitative and quantitative data. The different approaches will now be looked at in more depth.

Table 5.1
Distinction between qualitative and quantitative data

Characteristics	Qualitative data	Quantitative data
Meaning	Expressed through words	Derived from numbers
Collection	Non-standardised	Numerical and standardised data
Method of analysis	Conceptualisation	Diagrams and statistics

Source: Saunders et al. (1997).

5.2.4.1.1 Qualitative approach

Silverman (1998) argues that the strength of this method for both researchers and practitioners is that it focuses upon actual practice in situ. Indeed one of its strengths is that

it does not seek to generalise but rather to gain a holistic understanding of the whole phenomenon being studied (Patton, 1990). This approach offers the capability to capture the unique aspects of entrepreneurial small-firms (Hill and McGowan, 1995). Hakim (2000:34) argues that although qualitative research is about people it is not about individuals, rather it seeks to identify patterns, cluster attitudes and related behaviours that emerge from the research interviews. Qualitative research aims to understand the meaning of human action.

As mentioned previously small-firm research approaches have been criticised for being too formalistic and deductive and are therefore considered unhelpful in terms of leveraging the level of understanding required for small-firm research. Hence many have called for the use of qualitative approaches to research design in the small-firm environment (Curran and Burrows, 1989; Hill and McGowan, 1999; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006). The purpose of this research is to understand the learning relationship between small-firm learning network stakeholders and as such it is felt that this research study dictates a qualitative approach in order to provide a contextual understanding of these firms' learning processes (a view supported by Down, 1999; Hill, 2002). A further benefit of this approach is that it allows for responsiveness in design as understanding of the phenomenon unfolds (Patton, 1990: 41). In light of the above discussion this approach is deemed appropriate in this research study.

5.2.4.1.2 Quantitative approach

Quantitative research can be defined as a deductive approach to research that emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data. It is a method that seeks objective clarification. Patton (1990) argues that the quantitative approach requires the use of standardised methods. These methods fit the perspectives and experiences of the people being researched into a limited set of questions. Previous research suggests that quantitative data offers only limited insight into small-firm research (Burrows and Curran, 1989) this criticism is extended to the study of networking due to the dynamism of the networking process (Chell and Baines, 2000) and the requirement to research networking as a cultural phenomenon (Lynch, 2000). Morrison and Teixeira (2004) further argue that

communicative capacity can be limited through a quantitative approach in the tourism context. This approach was therefore not deemed to be appropriate for this research study.

Considering that the nature of the research problem is the analysis of micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment, it is evident that the researcher would adopt an interpretivist approach. As the research requires an understanding of individual learning processes in the context of the network environment this approach is deemed appropriate. The researcher believes that this study requires a phenomenological, subjectivist approach for a number of reasons which are discussed next.

5.3 Methodological and philosophical issues stemming from the literature review

The major issues identified by previous authors in the area of micro-firm research will now be explored in the context of philosophical and methodological choice of the researcher, these issues include:

- The need for qualitative methods when researching the micro-firm (Burrows and Curran, 1989).
- Requirement for an approach that mirrors the way that micro-firm owner/managers do business (Grant et al., 2001) - therefore an in-depth research approach is recommended (Curran and Blackburn, 2001).
- Requirement for closeness (Down, 1999) due to the pivotal role assumed by the owner/manager (Gibb, 1983; Devins et al., 2005) in the micro-firm setting.
- Requirement for an epistemological approach dictating closeness between the researcher and the owner/manager (Hill and McGowan, 1999).

Issues requiring (methodological) consideration specifically in relation to learning in this context include:

- The research question/objective requires that the researcher capture a range of experiences, attitudes and opinions (Patton, 1990) and preferences (Devins et al., 2005).
- Requirement to understand learning in the context that it occurs (Down, 1999).
- Recommendation in the literature that closeness can be facilitated through a collaborative approach (Grant et al., 2001).

As the overall aim of the research is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a 'learning network' environment the networking aspect of the research raises further issues which require consideration from a methodological and philosophical perspective:

- Requirement that there is social group interaction, discussion and testing of ideas (Kolb, 1976; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1998) Section 3.8, p 46.

- Adult learner’s demand that the relevance and application of ideas be tested against their own experience and wisdom (Kolb, 1976). This experience is shaped by collective learning in social contexts (Burgoyne, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1998) Chapter 3; Section 3.2.2.4, p. 34.

The rationale for choice of methodological approach has been summarised below in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2
Rationale for methodological approach

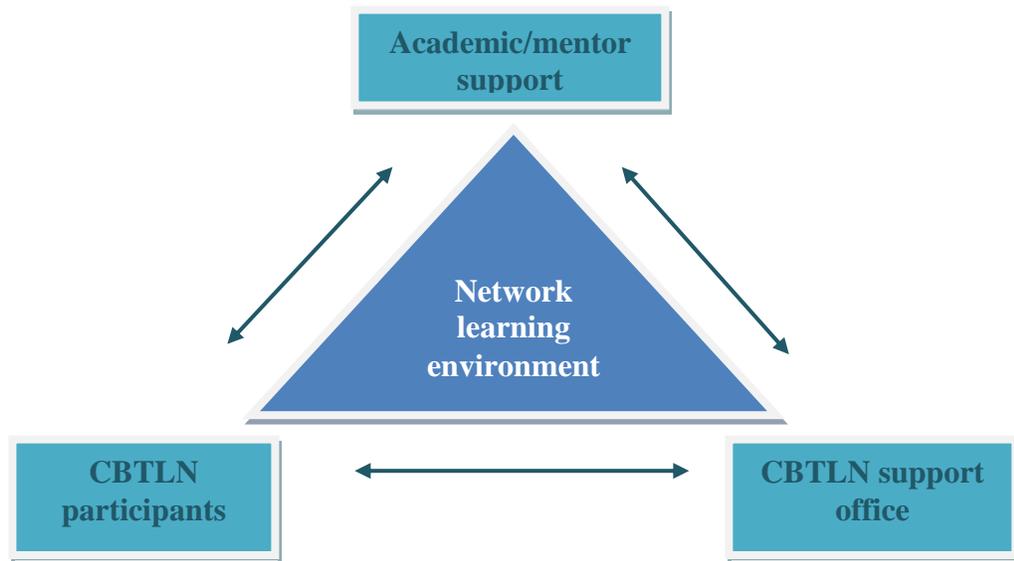
Elements of the Research	Requirements
Understanding the micro-firm owner/manager	Closeness of researcher and phenomenon
Capture differing experiences	Acceptance of a multiplicity of realities
Understanding the contextualised learning process	Detailed data collection
Seeking improvement	Responsive adaptive approach to the research problem

From this discussion it is evident that the closeness required for small-firm research ‘*is at variance with the positivist viewpoint*’ (Hill and McGowan, 1999: 10). The author feels that an interpretivist approach will lead to a refinement of theory and inform the framework for micro-firm learning in the network environment as intended and stated in the main research objective (section 5.1, p. 60).

5.4 Developing the conceptual framework

Subsequent to a consideration of the philosophical and methodological issues in relation to this study a framework was constructed to assist the researcher to conceptualise the research area (Fig 5.2). The roles of the main CBTLN stakeholders are outlined in Appendix A.

Figure 5.2
The conceptual framework



Devins et al. (2005; 540) outline the distinction between theory and practice in micro-business research and further conclude that elements of ‘practice’ influence owner/manager learning:

‘models, theories, techniques and tools that underpin management in one context and on the other hand the day-to-day lived experiences of those performing management in organisation’

Therefore, when studying learning in the micro-firm context, there is a distinct value in establishing a framework on which to investigate the lived experience in this context.

5.5 Alternative qualitative research methods

Operating within the qualitative paradigm offers the researcher a selection of methods and approaches including the interpretive case, ethnography and action research (Gummesson, 1991).

5.5.1 The interpretive case

Hakim (2000) describes the case study as the social research equivalent of a spotlight. Steps in a case study include defining the research question and collecting and assessing the evidence (Eisenhardt, 1989). Patterns are then identified and explained and finally the research is written up (Ryan et al., 2000; 153-158). The case study provides detailed knowledge of a social phenomenon (Hakim, 2000; Robson, 2002), particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear (Yin, 1994:13). Patton et al. (2000) and Hill and McGowan (1999) both recommend the interpretive case method when researching learning in a small-firm context and this method has recently been used in micro-firm research (Thomas and Thomas, 2006; Kelliher, 2006). Notably, this method is employed where the research issue is focused within one organisation or several related organisations in the case of a comparative study (Jankowicz, 1991). The researcher considered the case method in the context of the research objectives, and found that this research study required significant researcher involvement, accountability and the ability to introduce change/improvement and test the effectiveness of these changes. Therefore the case method was not the optimum approach in this regard.

5.5.2 Ethnography

Ethnography is concerned with descriptions of social patterns and participant observation through participation is at the core of this approach (Gummesson, 1991). A lengthy period of time is required to be spent in intimate proximity of the phenomenon being studied. Participant observation has its roots in the social anthropology of the early 20th century and it emphasises the meaning that people attach to their actions (Saunders et al, 1998). Down (1999) recommends research approaches that reflect ethnographic tradition in order to understand the individual and unique characteristics in small business research. Others argue that ethnographic approaches offer the best opportunities for closeness and

experiential learning (Grant et al., 2001). Observation, an ethnographic technique, was adopted into this research design as contextual dimensions of the learning environment (Grant et al., 2001) are extremely important in this study.

5.5.3 Action research

While participant observation is at the core of ethnography (discussed above in section 5.5.2) action research also encompasses active intervention (Gummesson, 1991). As Riordan (1995) points out the researcher is an observer of the system but also takes action upon what he/she observes in that system. Mumford (2001) states that action research is a process which involves; gaining an understanding of a problem, generating ideas to improve that problem and then applying those ideas into real world situations. Yin (1994) views action research as a process of reflection on what is practiced and the learning which occurs from that experience hence it is often referred to as practitioner research. Action research also contributes to the development of theory through action taking that is guided by theory and which can be supported or revised through evaluation (Susman and Evered, 1978).

5.6 Selected method – action research

Grant et al. (2001) contend that researchers who hope to understand the small-firm must approach the research, employing a method that takes into consideration the specific characteristics of small-firms and the contextual dimensions of the environment in which they operate. The proposed method is action research, an approach, which the author feels can facilitate the contextual and collaborative contribution that all the stakeholders involved in the CBTLN programme can make (as outlined in the conceptual framework Fig 5.2, p. 70). This research approach has been recommended in the context of learning development (Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2002). This approach will also permit the facilitation and improvement of the transactional learning relationship between the observed CBTLN stakeholders.

Susman and Evered (1978) define the client system as the social system in which the members face problems to be solved by action research. They further argue that the focus of action research is upon the modification of these relationships to generate communication and problem solving skills. This approach also capitalises upon the value of the ‘insider’ view afforded to the researcher as part of the dual role of research assistant (working in the observed CBTLN) and MBS student. This approach allowed the researcher to observe the CBTLN support office, CBTLN participants and CBTLN academics/mentors from a vantage point as member or ‘insider’ of the support team (an approach utilised and recommended by many, including: Riordan, 1995; Mumford, 2001; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). This role duality and its associated merits and concerns will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Table 5.3, p.74 outlines the philosophical foundations of action research. This facilitates the review and analysis of issues in relation to the overall aim of the research, which is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment.

Table 5.3
The philosophical foundations of action research

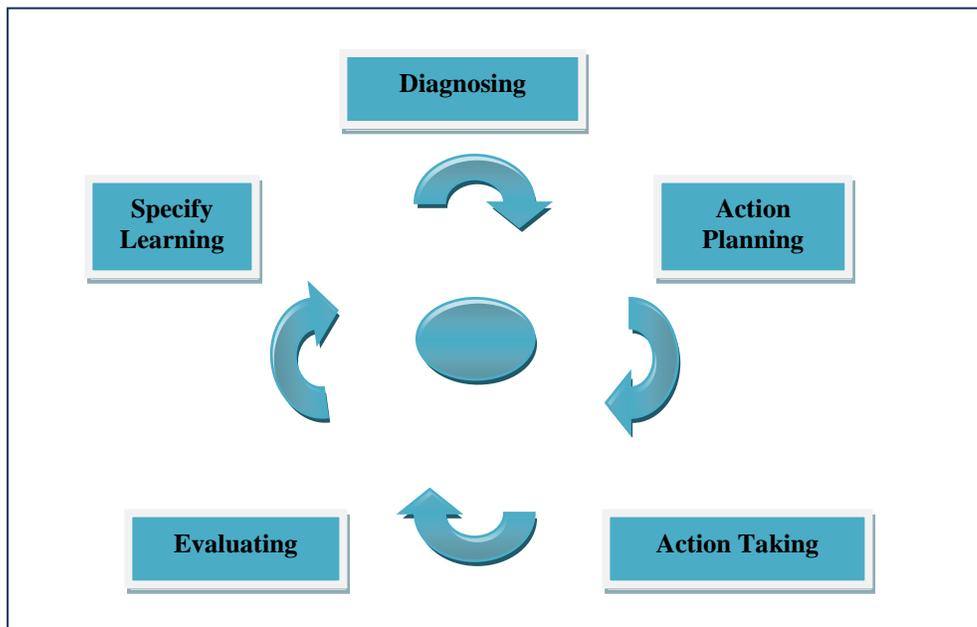
Philosophical foundations	Action research
Ontology	Objective
Epistemology	Subjective
Theory	Particular
Reflexivity	Epistemic
Role of researcher	Close to data

Adapted from Brannick and Coghlan, (2007).

5.6.1 The action research process

Many authors have identified research as a process with a series of steps (for example: Zikmund, 1997; Saunders et al., 1997; Sekaran, 2003; among others). The action research process is a cyclical one which incorporates five phases; these are outlined below in figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3
The action research process



Adapted from Susman and Evered (1978).

The action research process firstly involves defining/considering the research problem. Action is then proposed and taken. Herr and Anderson (2005: 84) point out that confusion about what changes can be made is the norm at the initial stage of the process, as each change informs the next. Changes resulting from action are monitored by means of data collection and analysis. Reflection on change as a result of the action taken is followed by the modification or introduction of additional change. The cycle then repeats itself until eventually a lack of resources determines the end of the project. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) confirm that a single iteration is appropriate at Masters level, multiple iterations being the domain of PhD or equivalent.

Robson (2002) asserts that as a research method, action research is distinguishable in terms of its purpose, which is to influence change in the phenomenon being studied. The author also highlights that engineering and supporting change is a central tenet of the process. This change occurs not only in a problem solving capacity but also to discover more about the phenomenon being researched (Denscombe, 1998). Indeed Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) suggest that action research involves addressing ‘norms’ to make changes to the way things are done, and it therefore makes the environment more effective. Action research offers the dual benefit of improvement and contribution to theory (Gummesson, 1991 and Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002: 172). Action research in a learning context can be traced back to the 1920s and the work of the Hawthorne experiments. Susman and Evered (1978) contend that the action researcher enables the development of others. As a research method it has been used more recently by a number of researchers (Bartunek et al., 1993; Mumford, 2001; Coghlan and Coghlan, 2006; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) demonstrating its acceptance as a research method in the learning context.

Action research (AR) involves changing the situation through deliberate action (Coghlan, 2007). Throughout the AR process action is identified through data collection, literature review, observation and CBTLN stakeholder feedback. Specific action/changes implemented in this project are outlined in Appendix C. Techniques employed to ensure the quality of the process can be viewed in Table 5.4 (p 79).

Improvement can also be achieved through the production of a strong report with a comprehensive understanding of the audience for which it is produced. It is intended that two reports will be produced at the end of the research process, one for Fáilte Ireland and another for the Fáilte Ireland CBTLN south and south east support team. Riordan (1995: 11) contends that the adequacy of interventions stems from participant perception of the situation, both the participant and researcher learn about the system. The researcher, through further intervention, transfers this learning into usable knowledge.

Coghlan and Coughlan, (2006: 159) explain that while action research is context specific it:

'...demands an explicit concern for theory that is formed from the conceptualisation of the particular experience in ways that are intended to be meaningful to others'.

Brannick and Roche (2005) cited in Brannick and Coghlan (2007) and Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) contend that theory development in action research is brought about through a cyclical process which involves two action research cycles which operate in parallel. While one cycle focuses upon the core research project the other is a reflection cycle that inquires into the enactment of the core research project. The importance of reflexivity in the action research process will be discussed later (Section 5.6.2, p.77). Action research contributes to the development of theory through action taking that is guided by theory and supported and revised through evaluation (Susman and Evered, 1978).

While it could be argued that a researcher's role is merely to research, report the findings and not to get involved in the process, this method requires the researcher to take on multiple roles. Herr and Anderson (2005) advise that role complexity is addressed and incorporated into the research methodology. Role complexity has lead some to question the validity of what is termed insider research however there are many authors who support the value of insider research in this context including: Brannick and Coghlan (2007); Grant et al. (2001); Hill and McGowan (1999) and Down (1999). The validity of this approach will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter (Section 5.12.2, p. 89).

Participation and collaboration amongst the researcher and those being researched are also central features of this research method (Robson, 2002) and those affected by the research should be involved in it. This requirement means that there is no distinction between researcher and practitioner according to McNiff and Whitehead (2001). McNiff and Whitehead (2002) further suggest that at times during the action research process, ideas and problems arise that although are not the main focus of the study need to be dealt with to facilitate progress of the main research. Role conflict can occur when timing dictates a premature requirement for action, before the data has been fully reflected upon (Coghlan, 2007). Therefore decisions for action must be made at times before a full understanding is achieved (Herr and Anderson, 2005: 12). This issue was evident in iteration 1 of this research (Appendix C; iteration 1).

5.6.2 Reflexivity in the action research process

Self reflection is central to the action research process. Herr and Anderson (2005) point out the importance of stepping back from the ‘puzzle’ to gain perspective. As action research is principally a personal theory there is a need to maintain a strong emphasis on reflexivity. Brannick and Coghlan (2007; 583) define reflexivity as:

‘The concept used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research’

Maintenance of a research diary is a recommended action research technique. Saunders et al. (1998) point out that the diary is a useful mechanism to record the development of ideas, reflections and research methodology. Reason and Bradbury (2001) highlight another function of the diary; it provides the researcher with a means of recording choices and their consequences. The researcher maintained a reflective diary for the duration of the research project, this facilitated researcher reflexivity allowing the researcher to acknowledge each of the criteria identified as issues. Through the action research approach each of these issues were dealt with in the applied method.

5.7 Data collection

Data management for this research project was a constant iteration between personal experience of research, potentially relevant theory, underlying assumptions, data and participant/stakeholder feedback (Dey, 1993).

5.7.1 Data collection techniques

Techniques are procedures which are followed to gather and analyse data in order to extract the information that the data contains (Jankowicz, 1991). The potential data collection techniques used in an action research (qualitative research) project are focus groups, observation, reflexive diary and documentation review.

5.7.2 Data collection protocol

The data collection protocol detailed the data collection techniques utilised for this research and also outlines their respective value in terms of the overall research objective. These are tabulated next in Table 5.4 (p 79).

Table 5.4
Data collection protocol

Technique	Date	Data Source	Research Value	Technique protocol
Observation	Sept 06- June 08	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBTLN learning events • CBTLN stakeholders • CBTLN internal documents 	<p>Reveals actual practice</p> <p>Context specific insight</p>	<p>Appendix B.1</p> <p>Observation Schedule</p> <p>Table 5.5, p.82</p>
Research diary	Sept 06- June 08	Incorporates all data collection techniques	Documentation and interpretation of observations, ideas, motivations and the development of planned interventions and outcomes.	N/A
Focus group	10 th & 17 th Oct 07	Participant	<p>Context specific insight</p> <p>Group interaction</p> <p>Diverse range of views captured</p>	<p>Appendix B.2</p> <p>Focus group protocol</p>
Literature review	Sept 06- Ongoing Conducted in tandem with research and reviewed upon completion	Relevant literature	<p>Identification and analysis of factors/themes impacting micro-firm learning in a networking context.</p> <p>Enlighten subsequent research and changes</p>	N/A
Secondary data collection	Ongoing	Internal and external document review	<p>Historical and on-going insight provided</p> <p>Context specific insight into actual practice</p>	<p>Table 5.6, p. 84</p> <p>CBTLN data sources</p>
Dual role	Ongoing	Context specific insight informed by relevant theory	Dual agenda –contribution to practice and science	N/A

5.7.3 Key data collection techniques

The key data collection techniques adopted for this research are the focus group, observation and reflective diary. These techniques have been recommended in the small-firm context by (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Newby et al., 2003) and also specifically in relation to learning by (Sullivan, 2000; Mumford, 2001; Cunliffe, 2004).

5.7.3.1 Focus group

A focus group can be defined as a group of 4-12 people who discuss the topic at hand with the guidance of a moderator (Hakim, 2000). In this research two focus groups were conducted comprising 6 participants in each, representing one focus group in each studied region (south and south east). The focus group allows for a variety of points of view to be discussed, generating and evaluating ideas and aiding exploration and explanation of concepts (Saunders et al., 1998).

Newby et al. (2003) reported that the principal benefit of using a focus group is that the interaction generated a more diverse range of views than would have been possible using more traditional methods. Blackburn and Stokes (2000) suggest that group interaction in the focus group setting can combat difficulties previously identified with face to face interviews, where participants can feel uncomfortable and provide answers that they feel the interviewer wants to hear. Indeed this has proven to be the case in recent micro-firm research (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000). While it has been argued that the focus group produces less information on an individual level it yields valuable information as the group reacts and develops a perspective on the subject (Hakim, 2000). The focus group also allows for common issues which arise to be dealt with (Newby et al., 2003) and the motivations of the group can also be explored (Hakim, 2000). In the following quote Newby et al. (2003: 242) sum up its value as a method which generates a richness of data through:

The range of views, the depth of understanding, and the degree of specific and personal contexts they can provide.

It is not without its disadvantages however. As mentioned earlier a level of skill is required to manage the direction of discussion among the group (Saunders et al., 1998). The ability to control dominant personalities and encourage quieter participants to play an active role is important in a focus group setting. It has also been identified as good practice that participants involved in the focus group should not know each other prior to the focus group taking place (Curran and Blackburn, 2001). Blackburn and Stokes (2000) in Newby et al. (2003) criticise more recent research on the smaller enterprise for not gaining enough understanding of process issues commenting that the focus group is under utilised in this context.

A focus group protocol was designed subsequent to a review of the relevant literature on effective research methods and techniques and keeping in mind the overall objective of the research. To reiterate the main research objective is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment that will eventually inform a framework on micro-business learning. This protocol can be viewed in Appendix B, Table B.2.

5.7.3.2 Observation

Observation is another key research/data collection technique utilised in this study. Its strength as a technique is that it reveals actual practice. Participant observation has roots in ethnographic research studies and it emphasises the meaning that people attach to their actions (Saunders et al., 1998). As an approach observation has been used in organisational learning research (Mumford, 2001; Sullivan, 2000). As the overall objective of the research is seeking to understand individual micro-firm owner/manager learning in the network environment, observation of actual practice in situ was a necessary requirement.

Tucker et al. (2002) contend that observational data can be used as a foundation for new descriptive and theoretical propositions about a subject. The researcher as the research instrument observed the CBTLN stakeholders, learning events and supporting documentation relevant to this study. Participant reactions and comments were documented on site and through evaluation and feedback at the various CBTLN learning interventions.

Details of these observations have been tabulated in the observation schedule below (Table 5.5).

Table 5.5
Observation schedule- CBTLN learning interventions

Learning intervention	South East Region	South Region	Criteria
Network briefing event	15th February 2007	22nd February 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal conversations • Evaluations • Feedback session from each LN group
Local network meetings	Ongoing – 6 per year	Ongoing – 6 per year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LN meeting reports • 6 month facilitator and participant evaluations
On-line marketing training	Various dates allocated from vetting process	Various dates allocated from vetting process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Conversations with project coordinator
Spring residential seminar	25th and 26th April 2007	18th and 19th April 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Informal conversations • Stakeholder review
Autumn residential seminar	17th and 18th October 2007	10th and 11th October 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Informal conversations • Stakeholder review
Optional master classes	21st and 29 th November 2007	21st and 29 th November 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Conversations with project team and coordinator
CBTLN support office	Ongoing	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal conversation • Formal team meetings

Riordan (1995: 7) makes a valuable point in this context stating that ‘*no one is ever really an observer of social events, but always somehow also a participant*’. Therefore it was important that the researcher’s own perceptions and observations were documented in the reflexive diary which was maintained throughout the research process and will be discussed in the next section.

5.7.3.3 Reflective diary

The importance of reflexivity (see glossary) in the action research process has already been discussed. Cunliffe (2004) recommends the use of a journal or diary arguing that it can be means of learning in itself and argues that developing a critically reflexive perspective allows the researcher to question his/her actions, develop knowledge about those actions and in doing so exposing the assumptions that influence those actions.

The reflective diary has been advocated as a rigorous documentary tool (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Stake, 1995). Cunliffe (2004) points out that journal writing is not just thinking about thinking but thinking about self from a subjective perspective. Reflexive questioning is used to question and assess possibilities for change (Cunliffe, 2004). For this research a reflective diary was utilised on a continuous basis and it provided several benefits in the context of this research including its use as a record keeping device where ideas and themes could be mapped, the diary also served as a reflexive tool to question the researchers own interpretations of the collected data.

5.8 CBTLN data sources employed

Secondary data was also used to compliment the primary data collected. Various government publications and reports were analysed for this research. Specific internal documents relevant to the overall objective of this study were identified and tabulated. This allowed the documents to be assessed in terms of relevance and appropriateness. These internal CBTLN data sources are outlined in Table 5.6. A detailed description of each of these documents can be viewed in Appendix A.

Table 5.6
Internal CBTLN data sources.

Data Sources	Relevance	Element required	Value
Learning Needs Analysis (LNA)	Reflexive tool and research baseline	Learning needs Identified	Statement of perceived learning needs
Tourism Business Development Plan (TBDP)	Background information regarding learning in the CBTLN programme and the application of that learning.	N/A	N/A
Programme event evaluations	Statement of learning after residential events. Used prior to changes made (Appendix C: Iteration 3)	Statement of learning and intention to apply learning back in the business	Statement of learning and identification of applied learning
Facilitator evaluations	Perception of effectiveness of the learning relationship	Feedback perceptions of effectiveness of the learning relationship	Perceptions of learning impact and applicability and effectiveness of the learning relationship
Participant evaluations	Perception of effectiveness of the learning relationship	Feedback perceptions of effectiveness of the learning relationship	Perceptions of learning impact and applicability. Effectiveness of the learning relationship
Local Network (LN) reports	Learning in the local network setting	Learning interactions reported at the LN meetings	Documented evidence of learning at LN meetings
One-to-one report	Will not be part of criteria for focus group (data will be captured regardless)	Individual learning	Importance of individual learning

5.9 Applied research approach

The applied research process outlined below (Fig. 5.4) took into account issues stemming from the literature review, the research objectives, the action research approach and, the data collection methods used for this research.

Figure 5.4
The applied research process

Research Title

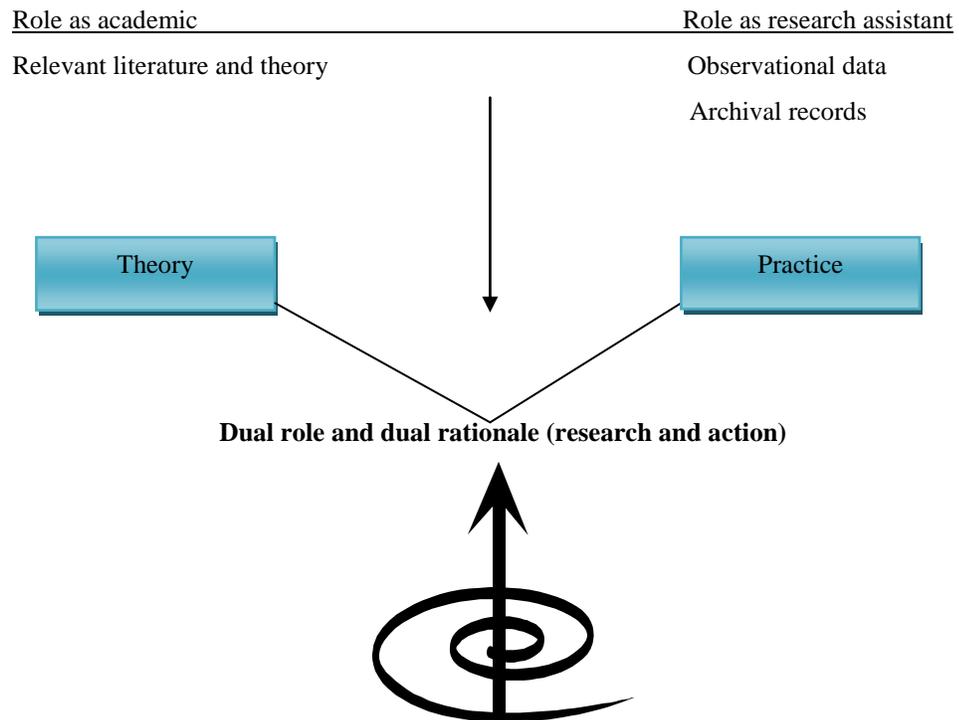
An analysis of the learning relationships amongst micro-firm owner/managers and stakeholders in a small-firm learning network in the Irish tourism sector

Literature review

1. The micro-firm
2. Learning
3. Networks

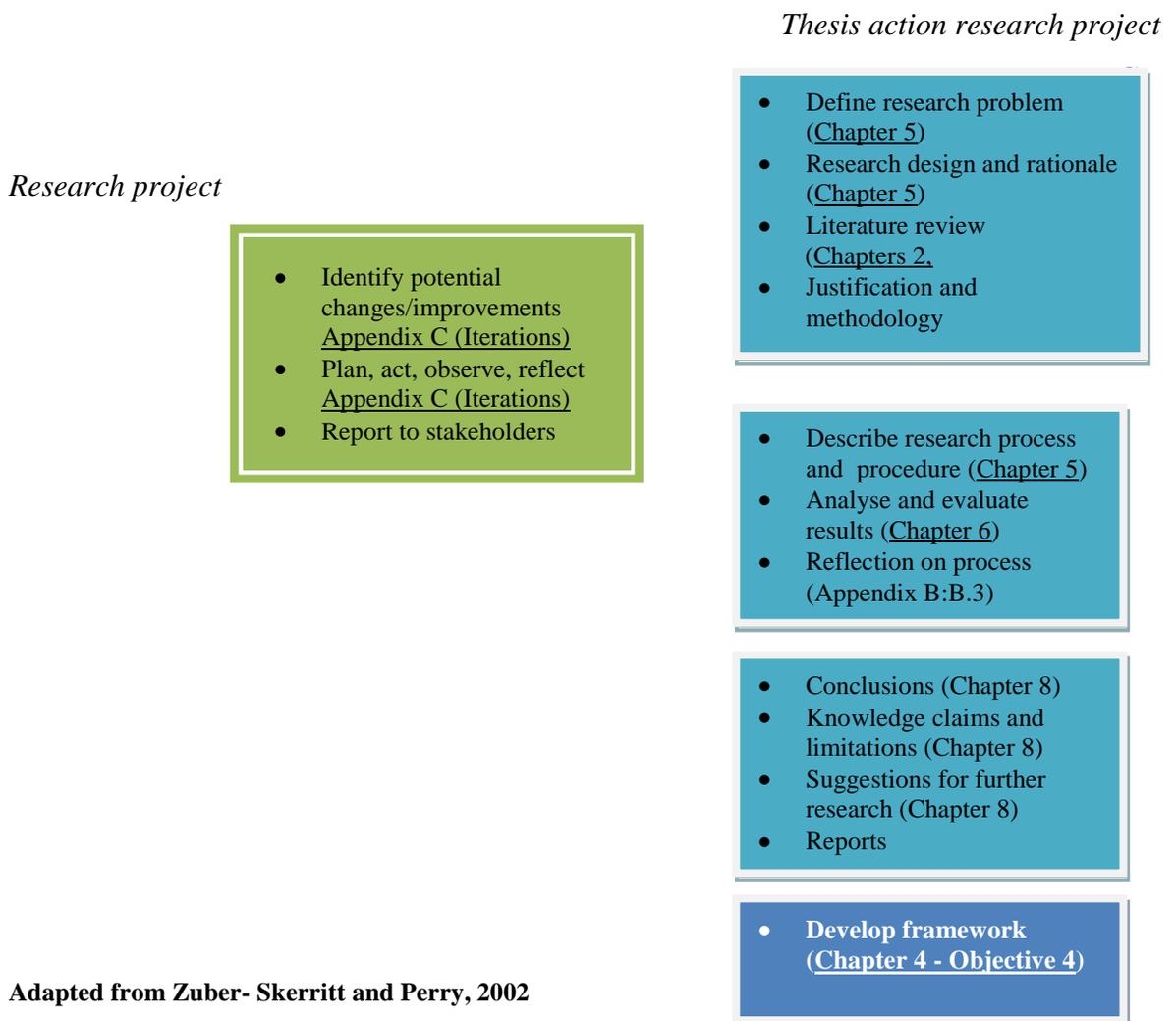
-----Research strategy-----

Action research



The action research process initially involved observation and data collection as part of the CBTLN research assistants' role outlined in Fig 5.4. Issues arising from a review of the relevant literature also informed the process. As discussed earlier, Brannick and Roche (2005) cited in Brannick and Coghlan (2007) and Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) explain that theory development in action research is brought about through a cyclical process which involves two action research cycles which operate in parallel. One cycle focuses upon the core research project the other is a reflection cycle that inquires into the enactment of the core research project. Figure 5.5 shows the relationship between the core action research and thesis action research in this project.

Figure 5.5
Relationship between the core and thesis action research project



5.10 Sampling methodology

Remenyi et al. (1998) recommend the use of a working definition of the demographic make-up of the population being studied. For the purpose of this research the participants of the CBTLN programme who fit the definition of a micro-firm owner/manager form the sampling frame. The population therefore consists of those participant businesses employing less than 10 employees, consistent with the micro-firm definition outlined in Chapter 2. The sample will be further refined to incorporate the criteria outlined below:

1. LNA complete and received to the office (details of the LNA outlined in Appendix A).
2. Attendance at the autumn residential events (details of the residential outlined in Table 5.5, p.82).

5.10.1 Reducing bias in a non-random sample

In total there were 140 participants on the 2007 CBTLN programme, eighty one per cent of these fit within the working definition of a micro-firm. Having applied the criteria set out above (Section 5.10), twenty owner/managers from the south region and twelve from the south east met the criteria. From these final groups, every third participant was contacted and asked to take part in the relevant focus group. Prior to this contact an email (outlining an opt-out clause) was sent out to all members of the network meeting the criteria for focus group selection. The author liaised with the other research assistant on the CBTLN programme to ensure that there would no overlap of the sample.

In total seven participants were selected from each of the south and south east groups, six taking part in each focus group and one on standby from each region. Individual profiles for south and south east focus group members can be viewed in Appendix B; table B.4 and B.5.

5.10.2 Pilot testing

The purpose of the pilot test is to resolve doubts by testing whether the data that was intended for collection will reveal the information sought to answer the research question. Herr and Anderson (2005) contend that a pilot study in action research terms is likely to be the early stages of ongoing research.

The author was not in a position to conduct a pilot focus group due to the limited size of the total population. To overcome this issue the researcher selected a participant to go through the proposed focus group questions with. This allowed the researcher to ensure that the information retrieved would address the objectives of the research, that the data would be suitable for analysis and that the proposed techniques were appropriate (Jankowicz, 1991).

The pilot interview highlighted a number of problems with the intended research questions. These included problems with guidance, terminology and it also highlighted issues in relation to partiality of memory. Focusing on individual learning needs appeared to make the pilot study participant uncomfortable in the one-on-one interview situation reinforcing the suitability of the focus group in the context of the research objective. In light of the above issues several amendments to the original questions/discussion topics were made. The researcher decided that learning needs common to the group and learning needs which were individual to some members of the group would be tabulated. Data would also be collected from the LNA of the final sample group. A hard copy of the LNA would be handed out to 'jog' the memory of the group. The language used throughout was jargon free.

5.11 Data management

Saunders et al. (1998) assert that qualitative data cannot be collected in a standardised way due to its very nature. Several data collection tools were utilised by the researcher to capture the richness and fullness of the data in relation to this research. Throughout the process agreements with relevant stakeholders regarding ownership of the data were made, an approach recommended by Herr and Anderson (2005). This issue of ownership arose in this research when deciding whether or not to include the LNA as a data source. This issue was resolved at a meeting between the researcher, the research supervisor and the programme manager where it was decided that the CBTLN LNA is the property of the CBTLN and as such can be used for the purposes of research for the CBTLN programme. The vast amount of internal CBTLN data has been previously outlined in Table 5.6 (p.84) and the applied data management technique is outlined below in Table 5.7.

Table 5.7
Applied data management technique

Technique	Data collection	Data management
Diary	Continuous	Interspersed review
Observation	Continuous	Documented in diary
Focus Group	10 th and 17 th Oct 2007	Documented and recorded
Document analysis	Continuous	Review of tabulated learning documents (Table 5.6).

5.12 Research legitimacy

Validity, reliability and generalisability are collectively referred to as legitimacy. These are now discussed in turn.

5.12.1 Relevance

Susman and Evered (1978) claim that the crisis of relevancy is in fact a crisis of epistemology, and they further argue that action research combats several deficiencies of positivist methods that have dominated social research. These characteristics include:

- Future orientated
- Collaborative
- Developmental
- Theory grounded in action
- Agnostic
- Contextual

5.12.2 Validity

Hakim (2000) argues that the strength of qualitative research is the validity of the data. In qualitative data validity refers to a presentation of solid descriptive data, so that the researcher leads the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study (Stake, 1995). Marshall and Rossman (1989) cited in Patton (1990: 244) argue that use of a combination of data types increases the validity by compensating for any

weaknesses in the use of one data collection method. Remenyi et al. (1998) recommend the use of multiple data sources and establishing a chain of evidence by applying a variety of data collection techniques. The data collection techniques utilised for this study can be viewed in Table 5.7, p.89.

5.12.3 Generalisability

Robson (2004) describes generalisability as the extent to which the findings of the research can be generally applied outside the specific environment in which the study was conducted. Susman and Evered (1978) argue that where actions and their consequences can be classified, they can be compared. Likewise Coghlan and Coughlan (2006) highlight the importance of extrapolating to similar contexts and situations, therefore acknowledging the method's limitations in this regard. As Silverman (2001) notes, context dependant insights are hardly generalisable. Coghlan and Coughlan (2006) agree, explaining that the aim of action research is not the creation of universal knowledge but argue that research must have some implication beyond that of the particular project for which it is conducted. Dick (1993) contends that where change is a requirement, there is a fair trade off between responsiveness and generalisability.

Finally, Herr and Anderson (2005) caution the action researcher that the study is likely to have implications beyond the interests of the researcher and therefore consideration must be given to the politics of the context.

5.12.4 Ethical considerations

According to Saunders et al. (1998) ethics refers to the appropriateness of the researcher's behaviour in relation to the rights of the people who are the subject of the research or those who are affected by the research. The author ensured confidentiality at the outset of the focus groups and in interaction with privileged documentation (Table 5.5, p.82). The role of research assistant permitted an introduction to be made at the 2006 CBTLN network briefing event. Participants were approached at the south and south east residential events and a brief presentation was provided outlining the dual role of the researcher within the CBTLN programme and also introducing and detailing the research project. Over-

involvement due to the nature of action research and issues of role duality throughout the project were considered. Reflexivity was achieved through the maintenance of a reflective diary.

5.13 Conclusion

This chapter sought to examine theoretical and conceptual factors influencing the research design. Having discussed the rationale for the chosen research methodology, methodological philosophies were debated and approaches to data collection and associated techniques were discussed. Justification for the chosen research approach was outlined. Issues relating to the relevance, validity and generalisability of the study were discussed prior to outlining any ethical considerations associated with this study.

Chapter 6

Findings

6.0 Introduction

This chapter profiles the findings resulting from the core action research project, examining how each finding addressed the primary research objective. To reiterate the principal objective of this research is to analyse owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment. Addressing this research question required the researcher to gain a contextualised understanding of the learning environment.

The learning catalyst in the context of the research is the Fáilte Ireland CBTLN south and south east. The adopted research approach allowed the researcher to explore micro-firm owner/manager learning in the network through researcher immersion in the learning environment. Emerging themes were identified and explored; these informed the objectives and conceptual framework (Chapter 3; Table 3.4, p. 47).

The value of presenting these findings is in mapping the criteria that influences owner/manager learning in a network environment and these findings will subsequently inform the framework for micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment. The following narrative (6.1) offers an insight into the initial iteration of the core action research project and how the objectives were shaped. Findings are then outlined under each objective. These findings subsequently inform the framework for micro-firm owner/manager learning (objective 4). These findings consist of data collected from researcher observation, focus group data, document analysis and participant/stakeholder feedback (Chapter 5; Table 5.7, p. 89).

6.1 Action researcher as research instrument

For the purpose of the following section the use of the first person will be employed to describe the researcher's role as research instrument. I joined the CBTLN support office in Waterford Institute of Technology in October 2006 in my role as research assistant and MBS student. This role allowed me to observe and participate in the CBTLN support

office, and to interact with CBTLN participants and academics/mentors from a vantage point as a member or an ‘insider’ of the support team. This initial observation period informed the conceptual framework (Fig 5.2, p70). I also spent this time observing how the programme functioned and the roles of the different stakeholders (refer to Appendix A, Table A.1 for full details of these roles).

Simultaneously I conducted a systematic review of the relevant literature to help identify the research dilemma(s) and potential intervention(s) in relation to the principal objective. I documented issues from this initial observation and literature review in a reflective diary, which has been maintained throughout the research process and is referred to where relevant in this chapter. Reflecting upon the initial stage of the process, two issues were prevalent:

1. Micro-firms are not homogenous, their needs are highly differentiated
2. How would I measure learning in this environment?

I examined the available internal data (Table 5.6, p. 84) and its relevance to the proposed study. Data sources that could be generated from day-to-day work routines were actively sought. Issues arising from the day-to-day work routines were continuously documented in the reflective diary (See Appendix B, B.3). I realised that identifying exactly what participant learning had occurred was not the aim of the study, nor would it be fruitful in the context of my overall research objective. As the needs of this cohort are highly differentiated there would be no baseline from which to measure success, therefore the learning needs analysis (LNA) document completed by participants at the start of the programme was used as a research base line and reflexive tool in order to establish levels of participant learning in the CBTLN.

Improvements and reflections identified through the core iterations in this action research project shaped the objectives for this research (Section 6.2, p. 94) and also led to the development and refinement of the framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment (objective 4). Potential changes to the network programme required

consideration, and issues of role duality, reflexivity and politics were present at this stage of the research. Being mindful that any proposed changes required consideration in terms of the network as a whole, I was aware that any changes may have implications for all of the businesses involved in the CBTLN and not just the micro-firms. I noted this issue in the diary (Appendix B.3.1).

6.2 Research objectives

The initial stage of this research led to the development of the research objectives. To reiterate, these objectives are:

1. To identify the levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment.
2. To examine the relationship between learning acquired and learning impact – changes which become embedded in the business.
3. To analyse the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the network.
4. To propose a framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment.

These objectives frame the research findings and the discussion chapter which follows. Having explored the literature review and tabulated the key themes in relation to the micro-firm (Table 2.2, p. 24), learning (Table 3.2, p. 40) and network impact on micro/firm owner/manager learning (Table 3.3, p. 46), a number of factors are revealed that impact owner/manager learning in the micro-firm network setting. Key themes were tabulated in Table 3.4 (p. 47) and are repeated here for convenience.

Table 3.4 (repeated from pg 47)

Key themes from literature review

Theme	Criteria	Influence/Impact
Micro-firm owner/manager characteristics	Informal Planner Poor analytical skills Opportunistic and intuitive	No identification or analysis of learning needs Crisis management Value business experience
Resource constraints	Time Limited Human Resources Financial	Immediately applicable learning is valued Little opportunity for developmental learning No expertise (learning requirements) Little impetus for developmental activity Little investment in learning and training Need to see immediate value added
Learning Barriers	Owner/manager inability to reflect Established management practice, views and norms Low autonomy/ responsibility Perception of relevance of subject/ material Learning structures Ineffective learning relationships	No reflection no action Not open to change Learned helplessness Low levels of engagement in the learning process Reinforce learned helplessness Reliance on informal information to aid decision making
Learning Enablers	Learning tools to aid reflection Learning structures Effective learning network relationships	Reflexive practitioner role developed Increased ownership of the learning process Facilitate and enhance individual learning in the network setting
Network Impact	Learning structures Stakeholder learning relationships	Engagement, contribution Reflection and anchor Share different knowledge contexts and resources Challenge and enquire

6.3 Research findings

The findings are presented from data collected through observations from my dual role as researcher and CBTLN research assistant, relevant document analysis, focus group sessions and stakeholder feedback. Therefore the findings also include references to relevant iterations of the research project (Appendix C) where changes were introduced by myself in the context of action researcher as research instrument.

Objective 1

6.3.1 Levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network

Objective 1 sought to identify the levels (6.3.1.1), types (6.3.1.2) and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment. The frequency of learning interventions is outlined in the CBTLN Learning Observation schedule (Appendix B; Table B.1).

Concerns regarding depth of involvement being sufficient to meet action research criteria were prevalent at this stage of the process and these concerns were noted in the research diary. Upon observation of the CBTLN support office the various learning interventions were mapped in terms of their relevance and value to the study, these can be seen in Table 5.5 (p. 82).

6.3.1.1 Levels of learning

Issues identified through the literature review and observations from my insider role revealed that the following criteria required exploration for the purpose of establishing levels of learning on the CBTLN programme.

6.3.1.1.1 Learning preference

6.3.1.2.1 The identification of learning needs

6.3.1.3.1 Reflection on learning

6.3.1.1.1 Learning preference

A learning style preference sheet (Figure 6.1) was handed out at the start of both focus groups to establish the preferred learning styles of the group. The majority indicated that their preferred method of learning was action learning. The results can be seen next in Table 6.1.

Figure 6.1
Learning style preference sheet

I like listening to the facilitator or presenter when I am learning	I like doing things (practice) and interacting with people when I am learning
I like to be able to write things down when I am learning	I like to be able to see images and demonstrations when I am learning

Table 6.1
Learning style preference results

PREFERENCE	FOCUS GROUP 1 (SE)		FOCUS GROUP 2 (South)	
		%		%
Listening	0		0	
Doing	2	50	4	57
Writing	1	25	1	14
Images/ Demonstrations	1	25	2	29

It appeared that learning style preference and its impact on learning levels was something that the south group had not considered before, as they looked uncomfortable when completing this activity. As a result of this I adopted a different approach with the south east group, challenging them to think about learning and what it meant to them, prior to the exercise. The group described learning using the following words:

- Knowledge
- New Ideas
- Improving
- Experience
- Expanding skills and knowledge that are already there

This focused the group and reinforced the topic of discussion (learning). The south east group appeared to find the learning preference sheet (Figure 6.1) easier to complete after this exercise.

Later observations throughout this research project also indicate that CBTLN participants have a preference for action over reflection. Other observed instances of action over reflection will be discussed as subsequent themes are explored.

6.3.1.1.2 Identification of learning needs

I used the LNA as a pre-change measure and a research baseline, (see Table 5.6, p. 84). At the time I felt that although the LNA was not directly related to the study it would allow more information about the learning needs of participants to be captured. I suspected that this information could be used to provide an insight into how participants identified their respective learning needs. It was also used as a reflective tool to help me to understand if the analytical process (discussed later in Section 6.3.2.3) had developed. I noted that in spite of an opportunity to do so, there was very little additional detail provided by participants in relation to their learning needs. In fact, very few filled the document out in full. I therefore believed that reflecting on the LNA would be a learning opportunity for the focus group members (submission of the LNA was a criteria for participation in the focus group) and also for myself as I questioned the value of this document in terms of helping participants to identify their learning needs (Appendix C; Iteration 1).

Participant (AP6) commented that the LNA was a good way of making the group focus on their business needs even if some of the terminology in the LNA was not normally used by the group it was good to get the words into their heads and think about what they meant. One participant (BP3) commented: *'It definitely brought me back into thinking, lovely to meet other small business people'*.

Having analysed the LNA submissions prior to conducting the south focus group; I mapped three learning needs (Table 6.2) and highlighted these to the group while distributing copies for their perusal. Two of the highlighted learning needs were common to the group; the other had been identified as a learning need by only one member of the group (AP4).

Table 6.2
Identified learning needs

Section of the LNA	Topic	Identified
People management	Employment law	1 participant
Business research	Statistics and data	All participants
Financial and operational management knowledge	Improving profit margins	All participants

Asked how they found the process of identifying their respective learning needs at the beginning of the programme, fifty per cent of the group indicated that they did not have any problems ‘*filling it out*’. One member of the group (AP1) said that it was not a difficult process as it was before the programme commenced, commenting that:

‘...it was before we [referring to the rest of the group] knew that there was a right or a wrong way to do it’.

On observation, the rest of the group seemed to share the same sentiment and revealed that they had tried to use the same terminology printed in the LNA. Although employment law had been identified as a learning need by one member of the group (AP4), the remainder of the group stated that it was not relevant at all to the micro-firm sector. The reaction from the group was quite strong. I noted that the group felt that the CBTLN support office staff had got it wrong in relation to categorising micro-business learning needs. This conversation highlighted a level of frustration among the group where learning needs were perceived as irrelevant. AP4 went on to comment that all the learning was invaluable and relevant, as this participant was starting up a business and the training had provided him with a template. While the rest of the group appeared to have preconceived ideas about what they had to learn AP4 did not, so he perceived it all as relevant.

Observing the first focus group I noted that the discussion centred on the relevance of the examples of learning needs that I had highlighted to the group. I therefore adopted a different approach for the south east session; blank copies of the LNA were distributed to the group to jog their memory. Time was allowed for the group to familiarise themselves with the document and think about the content. BP5 said that the LNA had been the first

thing they knew about the CBTLN programme and they had no idea what most of the document meant. The participant felt that there should have been something with the document to state what it was about. Another member agreed stating that they had been left with the impression that the CBTLN programme was for larger businesses when they reviewed the document. Only when contacted by a member of the CBTLN support team had the participant decided the programme might be relevant.

The majority of the group reported that they were apprehensive initially and felt that there was a level of knowledge expected for certain topics listed on the LNA. The group also commented that certain sections were off-putting for smaller business owners and overall the content of the document had left them with the expectation that particular training would be received down the line. BP5 commented '*...it seemed too good to be true and I kept thinking what's the catch, why is someone doing this for me?*'

Following this feedback and other observations, I had a meeting with the project coordinator; we discussed the findings from the focus groups and any possible solutions and amendments that could be made to the LNA. As a result of this meeting changes were made to the LNA to explain the documents use, relevance and benefits, details of which are outlined in Appendix C, Iteration 8. The observed impact of these changes on the subsequent CBTLN programme are outside the remit of this research study, and are therefore not included in the findings.

I asked the group how they went about identifying their learning needs. Reflecting upon this question at a later stage I noted that the conversation reverted back to the LNA and the group appeared to be visibly uncomfortable. The south group agreed that the document had focused them on what they had to do to develop their businesses. When questioned if their learning needs were something that they had given any thought to since filling out the LNA, participant BP3 stated: "*I take the opportunity from time to time to flick back over the LNA document, if I was writing it again it would be completely different*". All participants agreed that they would fill the document out differently if they had to do it again. BP2 stated that they "*had not gone over it (the LNA) yet but would in time*". Comments from

peers in relation to this subject seemed to instigate the comment from BP2. This discussion (among other observations) also led to changes in the structure of the Local Network meetings and reporting process. These changes can be viewed in Appendix C, Iteration 9.

Asked if identifying learning needs for their respective businesses was something that the groups had done before, both groups answered no. At this point in the discussion I felt that it was important to emphasise that the question did not refer to filling out the LNA document but rather taking time to reflect upon the contents and identify their learning needs. Again the conversation reverted back to discussing the LNA, the group reiterated that they did not know/understand why they were filling the LNA out, one remarked (AP5) that small business owners came from different educational backgrounds not having formal education but the experience of running business and ‘*attending the university of life*’.

Another member of the focus group (AP2) added that they thought the idea of the LNA was that everyone would be brought up to the same level of skill and knowledge. I noted that there appeared to be disappointment among the group regarding their life experience not being acknowledged. Relevance and terminology were evident barriers to learning and a range of participant comments support this, these can be seen in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3
Sample comments by focus group participants

Relevance	LNA terminology/barrier	Reflection
‘I just ticked the boxes’ ‘...we didn’t know if it was going off to the outer Hebrides’.	‘I would need a dictionary beside me to understand some of the terminology’	‘I would put a lot more thought into it now’ ‘Much more focused about the business now’
‘People management is not relevant to the small business’	‘The language is all wrong’ ‘...even though this is not our everyday language...’	‘Had I kept in mind that it didn’t all have to relate to me it would have been easier’ ‘...very beneficial in terms of clarifying my thought process.’

From my vantage point as an insider I also noted that several participants had been surprised that inclusion of the LNA was required as part of their submission for accreditation. While I was managing the administration side of the accreditation submissions I noted that one participant commented over the phone '*I can't believe the way that I filled that [the LNA] out back then*'. While this was clearly evidence of reflection it also suggests that participants would like to revisit their learning needs at the conclusion of the programme. This is also exemplary of analytical development.

6.3.1.1.3 Reflection on learning

Asked if the group felt that reflection was an important part of learning, one of the participants asked for clarification and using examples I clarified the question. BP1 commented that: '*You find that when you're busy you run the risk of losing the information and learning*'. The participant went on to say that while a lot of very useful things had been learned on the programme if they were not applied soon they may never be applied. The group commented that the residential helps, taking the time to step back from the day-to-day running of this business.

I had previously noted that although the CBTLN event evaluations did evaluate the learning event, they did not evaluate or facilitate participant learning in any meaningful way. Evaluations are also included in the submission for the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice (details outlined in chapter 4). I, in liaison with the CBTLN support team, decided to amend the evaluations (Appendix C: Iteration1) to include the following questions:

- 1. What have I learned today?*
- 2. How will I apply this in my business?*

I felt that these additions would encourage reflection, anchor learning and would also provide statements of learning that could prove useful for evaluating learning. I asked the focus group participants if they felt that the evaluations were helpful in terms of facilitating reflection. One of the group commented that the evaluations were: '*fine, keeps everyone on their toes, good for [the CBTLN team] to see where they're going*'. Participants appeared to

be speaking about evaluating the events while I was referring to the additional questions that had been added to the evaluation sheets. This concurred with my own reflections on the evaluations (See Appendix C; Iteration 3) and this led me to think at a later stage about how the group reacted about the term 'reflection' and I considered how the reflexive practitioner ethos could be developed within the CBTLN.

I enquired if the south east group had noticed the changes made to the CBTLN evaluation sheets, they had. Asked if they felt that it had helped their learning, one participant (BP5) stated: '*...while people have the best intentions [to use elements of learning back in their businesses], whether it will be followed through down the road, only history will tell*'. Participant BP3 commented that the additions were good because they allowed for learning to be summarised and related back to the business and also as it was a short section it '*...didn't take up lots of time*'. BP1 identified another reflection tool '*top tips to take back to my business*.' as being particularly useful. One participant felt that there would be more benefit allowing a few words to be put down on evaluations rather than just circling an answer.

6.3.1.2 Types of learning interactions in the CBTLN

Identifying types of learning interactions firstly required mapping the various learning interventions of the CBTLN programme, how those interventions provide learning opportunities and the perceived effectiveness of those interventions was also examined. The various learning interventions provided in the CBTLN were mapped on a flip chart through group discussion and feedback and have been tabulated in Table 6.4 below. A brief discussion of the findings will now be presented under each type of intervention.

Table 6.4
CBTLN learning interventions and effectiveness

Focus group comments			
Intervention	Effective	Ineffective	How do I learn
LN meetings	<p>Depends on facilitator</p> <p>‘Queries are always answered at the LN meetings... great for local information’</p>	<p>‘...don’t feel that the facilitator...talking shop, no control’</p> <p>Talking shop with no finality</p> <p>‘If we didn’t have x (facilitator) there to step in and control the meetings.....’</p> <p>‘...not very focused.’</p> <p>‘...objectives are way too broad.’</p>	<p>‘from the facilitator’</p> <p>‘What we share with each other’</p> <p>‘I feel drowned out by the bigger businesses’</p>
Residential events	<p>‘Excellent’</p> <p>‘Very relevant to the small business’</p> <p>‘ten out of ten’</p> <p>‘You will always take something even if it doesn’t suit...’</p> <p>‘...very positive ...meeting other like minded people’</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Presentations ● Networking ● Each other

Focus group comments			
Intervention	Effective	Ineffective	How do I learn
On-line marketing	‘Brilliant’		‘...so relevant to everyone’
Pricing and Finance	‘Highlight of the whole training event’.		‘He made the information very simple....’
One-to-ones	<p>‘Yes, effective’</p> <p>‘Not long enough but very helpful in terms of learning’</p> <p>‘I could talk more freely, not as restrictive’</p> <p>‘Clarified the mind, I left with more questions than answers’</p>	<p>‘Very one way...I didn’t benefit from it’</p> <p>‘...a complete waste of time.’</p>	<p>‘I enjoyed the one-to-one environment’</p> <p>‘I found that I was answering or laying out my business strategy, which was helpful but I didn’t get any solutions or opportunities to discuss particular problems’</p>
Extranet	‘So much information to contend with at the start of the programme’	<p>‘Great for local information’</p> <p>‘the information gets lost in the extranet’</p> <p>‘It takes ages to trawl through it’</p>	‘Time is an issue if I could give it 10 minutes a week it would help’

The CBTLN provides a number of learning interventions, these interventions [identified above] have been grouped into the following types:

- 6.3.1.2.1 Formal training interventions
- 6.3.1.2.2 Individual learning interventions
- 6.3.1.2.3 Informal group learning interventions
- 6.3.1.2.4 On-line learning interventions
- 6.3.1.2.5 Classroom based learning interventions (Master classes)

These will now be examined in more detail.

6.3.1.2.1 *Formal training interventions*

Formal training is provided at two residential training events where all of the regions network members attend a range of workshops providing learning on key business development topics. The networking element is facilitated throughout the two-day event and networking lunches and residential dinner underpin the networking ethos of the CBTLN. Observations, evaluations, feedback from various stakeholders from the residential learning interventions and both focus groups reveal that the vast majority of participants really enjoy and benefit from this type of intervention. One member of the group (AP5) remarked that there had been no one to advise them when they had started their business and that residential events offered participants '*best practice in advice*'. It was also pointed out that '*we can't be inspired if the speaker doesn't deliver on the day*'. A range of other positive comments were provided these can be seen in Table 6.4 (p. 105). The group also indicated that they learn through networking and presentations at the residential events.

6.3.1.2.2 *Individual learning interventions*

Opportunities are provided to all participants for individual one-to-one meetings with their respective LN facilitators. These meetings provide the opportunity to discuss and identify learning needs, identify areas for additional assistance through business analysis and identify a suitable approach to enhance business performance.

The focus group members indicated that the one-to-one meetings had helped them to focus on specific business issues however as (BP4) commented that: '*I thought the one-to-ones would be about problems relating to the individual's own business needs*'. Others comments indicate that some members attending these one-to-ones wanted immediate solutions to business problems, demonstrating an emphasis for action over reflection, analysis or planning. Another participant (AP5) felt that the one-to-ones were of little value. The researcher noted that this participant (AP5) had seemed particularly willing to take responsibility for his own learning. Some participants found this intervention beneficial suggesting that a follow up session would be helpful. Another participant

commented that it would be a good idea to hold the one-to-one meetings soon after the residential events and before finishing the programme.

6.3.1.2.3 Informal group learning interventions

Informal group learning in the CBTLN consists of peer-to-peer learning within the learning set. The learning set typically comprises up to twelve businesses and each meeting lasts three hours on average. The facilitator ensures that members of the learning set work toward action plans and development needs. Members within the group often raise common issues and request sector specific business information and research, some of which is directed through the CBTLN support office.

Members of the focus group reported that learning occurs at Local Network (LN) meetings (and other formal interventions) when network members interact, converse and share ideas and experiences. My insider role in the CBTLN office allowed me to monitor LN reports as they were received to the support office (details of this report can be seen in Appendix A.2.4). I felt that the LN meetings could be better utilised to anchor participant learning. The facilitators' role in guiding these meetings was referred to several times throughout the focus group discussion, two contrasting perceptions of the facilitators effectiveness (examples provided below 6.3.3.1.3) were narrated by members of the group. Findings indicate a level of negativity about this particular intervention among the majority of the participants.

At the focus group sessions, one member (BP5) relayed a scenario to the group from a recently attended LN meeting. The objective of LN meeting had not been agreed by the entire group and as a result several members of the group felt that their time was wasted. Another member commented (BP3): '*...a lot of the content of the meetings didn't suit but I took the opportunity to sit with the facilitator and go through my ... [pointing to the LNA on the table]*'.

6.3.1.2.4 *On-line learning*

The CBTLN website provides a range of on-line information sources including an extranet and on-line discussion forum. Although participants mentioned the extranet as a learning opportunity it is explicitly outside the aim of this research, as it is a very different learning domain to the other (face-to-face) interventions.

Participants at the focus group remarked in reference to the extranet that having less information to contend with at the beginning of the programme would be helpful. Participants also commented that they rely on the facilitator to relay valuable information that '*gets lost*' on the extranet. While it is recognised as a valuable learning resource by participants the amount of information is considered a barrier in the context of time poverty.

6.3.1.2.5 *Class-room based training*

There are several class-room based learning interventions held throughout the programme. On-line marketing training is one such intervention but there are other master classes held covering various business topics decided by participant request, feedback and determined from the LNA. These interventions are more specialised and as such are held for smaller groups of participants. I reviewed the evaluation sheets and noted participant and CBTLN support staff feedback in relation to on-line marketing training. All data sources indicate that participants found that the on-line marketing training very effective in terms of learning. I asked the focus group members if they had made changes in their business as a result, one member of the group (BP1) responded, '*I know that I was supposed to make changes but I haven't as yet*'.

The entire group agreed that the training was successful because the content was simplified [many of the group indicated that their IT skills were not well developed] and relevant, this was evident in the following statement from one attending member of the workshop: '*It was really good, he makes it sounds so simple, he [the trainer] has excellent knowledge on the subject*'. I later noted that this particular intervention focuses on each participant's own business website which may partially explain its success; participants see the relevance of

what they are learning and can apply it immediately. Findings suggest that uptake is not as strong for the other class-room based learning interventions such as stress/lifestyle management and people management.

6.3.1.3 Summary of findings from objective 1

The findings show a majority preference for immediately applicable action learning. The group also displayed a preference for drawing on previous experience and knowledge (experiential learning). Different learning styles also appear to link to different reflection styles.

It is evident that the content of the LNA led to participant expectations that require management. The LNA is not seen as valuable in terms of a continuous learning needs analysis or development. Terminology and relevance are major barriers to the analysis of learning needs.

The concept of reflection is difficult for participants. Tools to aid reflection are helpful but time restrictions must be kept in mind. The group appears willing to take ownership of their learning but tools and structures are required to facilitate this. It is also evident that some existing structures/tools appear to reinforce learned helplessness.

Formal training interventions were successful and relevance is demanded by the group. Individual one-to-one sessions were more successful with members that appeared more willing and open to reflect on their learning needs and analyse their business problems. More action focused participants were impatient that solutions had not been provided to their own business concerns and problems. Findings also indicate that peer-to-peer learning in the learning set could be facilitated more effectively. The majority of participants expressed a degree of disappointment in relation to the objectives of the LN meetings and they way that they were facilitated

Objective 2

6.3.2 Relationship between learning acquired and learning impact

This objective sought to examine the relationship between learning acquired and learning impact – changes which become embedded in the business.

I firstly wanted to ascertain if the focus group session had encouraged reflection (learning impact) among the group. I also wanted to examine the learning expectations that participants had as a result of participation on the programme. Ownership (6.3.2.1), relevance (6.3.2.2) and the development of the analytical process (6.3.2.3) were also examined in the context of this objective. In seeking to explore applied learning and the various interventions that facilitate this, the tools and techniques that appear to underpin applied learning in the CBTLN network were mapped and will later inform the framework. Subsequently learning impact (6.3.2.6) was assessed.

As participation in the focus group is in itself reflection, I attempted to ascertain if there had been a learning impact as a result of the experience. I asked the group if they normally reflected upon their learning experiences. The south group indicated that they did, on an individual basis. One participant described thinking about what had been learned on the journey home and over the following days, sharing experiences with friends and family. Some of the group found the discussion beneficial commenting that discussing what has been learned makes it '*stick more so than writing it down*'.

When the south group were asked if they felt they had a better understanding of themselves as learners following the discussion, the group fell silent. I noted that they appeared tired and I got the distinct impression that the thought of adding another intervention/session at the end of the residential events would not be appealing. The group commented that they could see the benefit of this type of discussion for the CBTLN support office and although the idea might be good in theory, people '*don't have the time*'. A member of the south east group stated that the focus group session had enabled the group to reflect on what had been covered on the programme.

All of the participants commented that their original learning expectations had been exceeded. Each group praised the on-line marketing training in particular. This concurs with data collected from on-line marketing evaluations, informal feedback from the CBTLN support team and from various participants. Learning expectations were exceeded but the indications are that these were not well developed and/or analysed at the start of the programme. These indications include:

- Analysis from the LNA, little detail provided on LNA submitted to support office
- Over-reliance on existing learning structures
- Surprise about the inclusion of the LNA for accreditation
- Poor recall of learning needs and statements that the document would be approached and completed differently if it was being completed again

In general learning seemed to be motivated by immediate problem solving in the businesses rather than analysis or planning. This was evident where one participant (AP3) commented that on-line training was undertaken to fix an immediate business problem and BP4 expressed disappointment that the one-to-one session didn't provide prescriptive solutions to specific business problems that the participant had. There were instances where analysis was prevalent such as BP4's implementation of a new pricing structure and AP6's analysis of the voucher system in relation to implementing it back in the business.

Several comments from the focus group members outlined previously suggest that a more strategic view would be adopted by participants in the future after an opportunity had been taken to reflect.

6.3.2.1 Ownership of the learning process

Although participants stated that they see the need to be responsible for their own learning, findings suggest that participants are very much reliant on existing programme structures to ensure that their learning requirements are met. This was evident from my role managing the accreditation process which involved manning an information desk at both residential

events, dealing with participant queries by phone and email and monitoring submissions for the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice (described in Appendix A). It was also evident that ownership was not strong throughout the focus group discussions and from other observations regarding the identification of learning needs, achieving learning objectives and evaluating learning.

While the group reported that they understood the need to be responsible for their own learning, they appeared unsure as to how they would achieve this. Discussion (Section 6.3.1.1.3) revealed that participants valued the tools provided to aid reflection and plan action (namely the evaluations and top tips sheet). Other comments supported the view that learning ownership was important to individuals, for example suggestions were provided from the group that would allow ownership to be facilitated (namely extensions to the evaluations, buddy system, action learning groups).

6.3.2.2 Learning intervention – relevance to participants

The entire group indicated that they found the CBTLN programme relevant to their business. The 6-month evaluations (Appendix A.2.3) support this finding with ninety per cent indicating that what they had learned on the programme would have a positive impact on their business and eighty four per cent stating that it could be practically applied. Feedback from participants and an analysis of CBTLN learning event evaluations show that where learning was perceived to be particularly relevant such as the on-line marketing training, participants were actively involved in the learning process and excited about implementing what they had learned. Where learning events such as the local network meetings were seen as less relevant, participants were very vocal about having their time wasted.

6.3.2.3 Development of participant analytical competencies

The development of analytical competency was monitored through the focus group discussions and observations from my insider role. Monitoring the LNA completed at the beginning of the programme (pre-change measure) revealed that this process of analysis seemed particularly difficult for micro-firm owner/managers. Comments in relation to the

development of owner/manager analytical capability are outlined below (Table 6.5). I had concerns regarding this issue and noted them in the diary (Appendix B.3.2).

Table 6.5
Development of the analytical process

Sample comments by focus group participants			
Prior behaviour and views	<i>'...before you just get stuck in a rut and forget about improving...'</i>	<i>'I just ticked the boxes...'</i>	<i>'It was before we knew that there was a right or wrong way to do it.'</i>
Reflective process	<i>'Now I think about everything I do from my customers perspective'</i>	<i>If I had just remembered that it didn't all have to relate to me then</i>	<i>Expanding skills and knowledge that are already there</i>
New behaviour and views (learning impact)	<i>'I feel that I will now pick other things to learn.'</i>	<i>'I would go about filling it out completely differently now'</i>	<i>'I would be much more focused now on my business needs'</i>

Although analytical skills appeared poorly developed initially, they did show signs of improvement over the course of the focus group discussion. The group discussion also appeared to boost the confidence of participants and they began to think more strategically about their learning needs. A marked difference between the two groups suggests the importance of reflection in the learning process. I had asked the second focus group to think about what learning meant to them at the beginning of the session. I feel that this made a difference to the way that the rest of the session flowed in terms of focus and understanding.

6.3.2.4 Learning acquired

Subsequent to a consideration of learning expectations, ownership, relevance and the development of the analytical process, learning acquired on the CBTLN programme was explored. The CBTLN residential event evaluations were amended to include the following questions:

1. What did you gain from today's session?
2. What is the one thing that you'll apply to your business?

Drawing from a sample of evaluations and conversations from the focus group discussions, a sample of learning statements are provided in Table 6.6 below.

Table 6.6
Statements of learning and intended application

Intervention	Learning	Application	Source/Tools	Barriers
Residential	<i>'Learning and ideas are generated at these events and these ideas can be brought back to the group'</i>	Using what had been learned: a calendar promoting the groups collective businesses was produced New pricing strategy	TBDP Top tips sheet (Appendix A, Section A.2.6) Evaluations Focus group	
On-line marketing training	<i>'I couldn't wait to go back and apply it'</i>	Learning applied	Class/presenter notes	Time
Pricing and finance master class	<i>'Busy fool, we'll never forget that phrase...'</i> <i>'...food for thought, even though my product was not priced right, I had no means to make changes'</i>	New pricing structure	Formulas provided at finance workshop	Regulatory restrictions

Table 6.6 provides a range of statements and comments that demonstrate the learning acquired through various CBTLN interventions, assisted through CBTLN relationships and aided with various learning tools.

6.3.2.5 Learning Impact

Results from the six month participant evaluations show that ninety per cent strongly agreed or agreed that their involvement in the CBTLN programme will have a positive impact on their business (Appendix A.3). Findings from the focus group sessions concur with these results although in earlier conversations particular elements of the programme

were cited as not being relevant at all. BP3 commented: *'It made me focus... I'm in business a long time and you get into a run, but this had made me realise that you need to be learning all the time, you get caught up in the day-to-day running of the business and can forget about improving'*. Another member of the south east group added (BP1): *'...you [the participant] get into a comfortable state in the business and can forget about driving it [the business] forward'*.

Asked if what they had learned had affected the way they do business the south group commented that after the computer training [on-line marketing training] changes were introduced to participant businesses, some mentioned that they hadn't made changes as of yet but that they did plan to. The south east group also agreed that it had affected the way that they do business, but I noted that they seemed unsure and hesitant about how it had affected the way that they do business. BP3 said that he felt it would affect the way that he does business in the future.

The south east group agreed that they get caught up in the day to day running of the business, focusing on getting customers through the door and in the case of participant (BP4) under-pricing himself and *'working very hard for very little money'*. BP4 had increased his pricing structure by 15-20 per cent and reported that it has not affected his customer share and has made a significant increase to his profit margin. The participant stated that he had previously not known how to cost and price his product that he has learned how to do that through the programme. The participant went on to explain that the method that he now employs for pricing, he would never have thought of using prior to the programme. Asked if he had viewed the pricing issue as a problem previous to what he had learned, he stated that he had not.

There were several examples where changes were introduced to participant businesses with immediate results. One member of the group (BP3) commented that he now analyses his actions in the business to a greater extent. One participant (AP6) explained that from the learning she had received on the programme (pricing) she had changed her opinion about

the voucher system⁵. These examples are exemplary of changes in behaviour and views. These ‘stories’ of successful implementation of learning narrated by members of the focus group appear to motivate others in the group. Participants were interested to hear other perspectives on implementing what they had learned; an example was narrated by AP6 in relation to implementing a particular pricing strategy.

6.3.2.5.1 *Learning barrier release criteria*

All participants strongly agreed that they were willing to embrace change. AP6 remarked that ‘...as a new business, change is a constant’, [3rd year in business]. Several barriers were identified in the context of micro-firm owner/manager learning. These will now be discussed under the relevant resource criteria.

- **Time**

Time was the most prevalent barrier to learning; it was mentioned in several instances throughout the focus group discussion and on numerous occasions in my role as research assistant with the CBTLN support office. It is no coincidence that this particular barrier is cited most often when participants are considering membership of the programme; this is particularly so in the case of the smallest businesses. It is therefore highlighted as a major barrier to learning for the micro-firm owner/manager. It seriously diminishes the micro-firm owner/manager’s ability to reflect and also impacts on follow through/action, this was evidenced in several instances where the following comments were made by participants:

- ‘*If I had a couple of minutes a week it would help...*’ [Identifying learning needs]
- ‘*...nice idea but people don’t have the time*’ [Reflection on learning]
- ‘*With the best of intentions if I don’t apply it soon I may never apply it*’. [Action after learning]
- ‘*I know that I am supposed to but I just don’t get the time*’. [Application of learning]

Observations reveal that relevance and practical application are demanded by the group (for example the people management workshop observation outlined in section 6.3). Findings

⁵ The B&B voucher system refers to a system where B&B properties are listed with a travel agent. Vouchers can be pre-booked and purchased through the tour operators by visiting tourists. The B&B owner pays a fee to be listed as an approved accommodation provider under the scheme.

also show that even when learning interventions and material are considered relevant (6.3.), anchoring that learning back in the micro-firm is still a challenge.

- **Human resources (HR)**

Owner/managers indicated that they get caught up in the day-to-day operations of the business leaving little time to consider learning requirements. Observing a HR workshop at one of the residential events, I noted that one participant [a micro-business owner] questioned the presenter in relation to concerns about meeting employment law obligations. Awareness of legal obligations such as employment law and health and safety legislation appear to be low among this cohort and human resource and time constraints are also a learning barrier in this context. Findings show that there is no one in the firm outside of the owner/manager to identify learning needs and opportunities in this setting.

6.3.2.6 Summary of findings from objective 2

Where learning is relevant and immediately applicable reflection is welcome. Findings suggest that relevance is key for reflection and double loop learning. Reflection does not necessarily seem to equate to action, suggesting that some form of follow up is required to assist micro-firm owner/manager learning in this setting.

Several issues identified as barriers in the context of micro-firm owner/manager learning need to be overcome for true learning to take place.

Objective 3

6.3.3 Learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the CBTLN

The third objective of this study was to analyse the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the CBTLN. This required the identification of the primary relationships between the relevant CBTLN stakeholders. These relationships, outlined in the initial conceptual framework (Figure 5.2, p.70) and their perceived effectiveness were investigated. The quality and appropriateness of the group's collective experience was also considered. Finally how the effectiveness of these learning relationships might be improved was explored.

6.3.3.1 Primary CBTLN learning relationships

Observations in my role as research assistant allowed me to identify four primary CBTLN learning relationships. As the overall objective of the study relates to owner/manager learning, the individual participant is the common denominator in the relationships identified below:

6.3.3.1.1 Learning relationship between participants (peer-to-peer)

6.3.3.1.2 Learning relationship between participant and workshop trainer/presenter

6.3.3.1.3 Learning relationship between participant and facilitator

6.3.3.1.4 Learning relationship between participant and CBTLN support team

Each of these relationships will now be explored in turn.

6.3.3.1.1 Participant and participant

Observations from the CBTLN support office coupled with observations of participant interaction at various CBTLN learning interventions and the examination of relevant internal documentation, revealed evidence of peer learning and group interaction in the network. Both focus group discussions revealed that all participants agreed that they definitely learn from each other, and confirmed that the programme was effective in the

facilitation of peer-to-peer learning. Peer-to-peer learning was also prevalent when the following interventions were discussed:

- Residential (Table 6.4, p.105)
- LN meetings (Table 6.4, p.105)
- Other (group projects such as the calendar project referred to in Table 6.6, p.115)

I asked the south east group if the skills and experiences of others in the group were of value to them; they stated that they were. Asked if they valued their own experience and skills one participant (AP1) stated that *'we have a lot more knowledge to share than we realise'*. Participant willingness to assist each other was evident throughout the research, even in the wider network. I noted from the CBTLN support office that one member of the focus group (AP5) contacted the office, offering to deliver basic IT training to some participants who were particularly weak in that area. This was facilitated through the support office.

The debate about the B&B voucher system referred to earlier in the chapter (6.3.2.5 Learning Impact) shows the group testing their ideas and experiences among their peers. One participant (AP6) explained that what she had learned from the workshop about pricing had changed her opinion about the voucher system. Other members of the group were interested to hear the participant's perspective on this issue and questioned AP6 about the experience of implementing this particular pricing strategy. I asked the focus group if this type of discussion was an example of the way that they learn from one another; they agreed that it was.

Both groups stated that they were willing to share ideas and experiences with their peers and that they felt that the network provided a forum for them to share and test ideas although there were recommendations regarding how this group sharing and testing could be better facilitated. There is evidence that group testing also has an influence on peer learning, this was prevalent in the discussion about the relevance of the on-line marketing training where following strong endorsements from the rest of the focus group AP2 commented: *'I must have been asleep on that day* [looking very surprised by the reaction

from the rest of the group]...*I will have to go back over it [the training notes] and have a look at it again*'.

Suggestions made by participants to incorporate a buddy system into the programme and suggestions to work in action learning groups are exemplary of the value placed upon peer learning and experience within the group. One member (BP2) stated that an action focused emphasis would be preferable and that grouping people into specialised groups (for example activities) would provide learning benefits. AP2 felt that implementing parts of what had been learned would require the assistance of others in the area/group. While another member of the group (BP4) felt that a buddy system would be beneficial, commenting;

'Someone that you could ring up and speak to and encourage...use each other to motivate and keep up the good work, rather than being embarrassed in a big group. It's hard to do everything but you get out of it what you put in'.

Another member (BP2) suggested that *'I think that it would be a good idea if we could get together in six months time and see what everyone is up to...'*. The south group also indicated that they felt comfortable sharing ideas and experiences with others in the network. One participant (AP2) remarked that: *'you give and you get twice as much in return'*, indicating a willingness to share knowledge and expertise, this was evident throughout the wider network over the course of the study

At the focus group session participants agreed that the network *'definitely was'* effective in terms of facilitating peer-to-peer learning although suggestions for improvement were also put forward. AP4 mentioned learning from other members with greater experience of running a small business. One participant (AP5) commented (nodding to AP4) *'it's a fantastic opportunity for new businesses to learn from mistakes that we've all made over the years'*. The researcher noted undertones of disappointment among some of the group that this 'life experience' was not being tapped into.

6.3.3.1.2 Learning relationship between participant and workshop trainer/presenter

Observations from my own attendance at the residential learning interventions revealed that participants challenge the presenter's knowledge and actively question the relevance and accuracy of the learning material, demanding that content is relevant to their business and business sector. This was evident when I observed several of the CBTLN presentations and workshops myself. I found that knowledge, and relevance and practical application were demanded by the group. This was particularly evident at a people management workshop where I noted that participants actively and forcefully questioned the content of the presentation and the speakers' knowledge on the topic. Comments such as (AP5), '*we can't be inspired by someone who doesn't deliver well on the day*' also support this view.

Following several observations and participant comments on CBTLN evaluations I noted that where topics were seen as less relevant participants were not as open to learning. The most successful learning relationships between participants and trainer/presenter appear to be most evident where practical learning occurs [on-line marketing training] and [product development planning] and where opportunity is provided to apply learning immediately, in concept at least, back to participants individual businesses. Evaluations from various workshop events support this, a sample of these comments has been provided in Table 6.7.

Table 6.7
Participant comments – CBTLN event evaluations

Event/ Workshop	Participant comments (CBTLN event evaluations)
Pricing workshop	<i>‘More participant interaction’ and ‘question and answers session’</i>
Marketing planning	<i>‘Breaking down my marketing plan into manageable chunks will make it more likely that I will do something with it’.</i> <i>‘Helps one focus on effective business strategies and puts one thinking of objectives for the business going forward’.</i>
Time management	<i>‘I now have tools to implement in the business that allow me to work out where my time is best spent- and more profitable.’</i>
General	<i>‘More time after sessions to discuss what action can be pursued to what ends’.</i> <i>‘More action emphasis...’</i> <i>‘More interaction from the floor’.</i>

6.3.3.1.3 Learning relationship between participant and facilitator

There was contrasting feedback from the different focus groups in relation to the perceived effectiveness of facilitators. Issues raised included control, advice and guidance (Table 6.4, p.105). One participant commented on the 6 month evaluation: *‘I have found that the group facilitation meetings have been more directed than facilitated’*, indicating that different facilitation styles are adopted by different facilitators. There were some positive comments made about these LN meetings. One participant explained that her group was very effective and they found the facilitator very good and went on to explain to the rest of the group that a calendar had been produced by the group as an outcome of these meetings. Another participant remarked that they rely on the facilitator to relay important information that might otherwise be lost due to time restrictions or access.

Internal document analysis from the 6-month evaluations provided feedback from the facilitators' and participants' point of view about the success of the learning relationship. These revealed that less than fifty per cent of participants felt that their facilitator ensured that the LN meetings were carried out effectively and any queries were raised effectively. The one-to-one sessions were also facilitated by the facilitators of each LN group. The facilitated individual aspect of learning was important to those that had gone through the process while others commented that it had been a waste of time.

Findings indicate that there may be misunderstanding and confusion on the part of the participant about the relevance and objectives of these sessions, suggesting that clearer communication is required from the CBTLN support office. A meeting was held with the programme manager and based on these findings changes to the structure of the LN meetings and LN reports were discussed (Appendix C) and implemented.

- **Learning dynamic between facilitators**

As part of my insider role as research assistant I availed of the opportunity to attend a facilitator training session provided by one of the most successful facilitators (as determined from participant feedback) of the CBTLN. I documented a number of important issues which arose at this training session in relation to successful learning relationships. While these issues refer to the relationship between the facilitators and the support office, I felt that they were worthy of inclusion in the context of this study as they influence individual learning. The issues are as follows:

- An identified need to agree the rationale and ethos for the LN meetings and one-to-one meetings
- Report and share concerns, problems and issues with facilitating the LN meetings
- Share best practice '*...we could discuss what works and what doesn't*'.

At a later stage in the research process these issues arose again at another CBTLN team meeting, following discussion and review it was decided that a best practice approach to

LN facilitation would be encouraged/implemented (details outlined in Appendix C, Iteration 9).

6.3.3.1.4 Learning relationship between participant and CBTLN support team

Findings suggest that the support team/office was important to participants on a number of levels including assisting with initial apprehension and providing an information hub where the support team are available to conduct sector specific business issues and queries. The CBTLN support team communicates the relevance of the programme to its customers initially at the recruitment stage but also throughout the programme through constant communication (for example the weekly update, replies to research requests among other communication mediums). The CBTLN support team communicates and promotes the networking and continuous learning ethos of the CBTLN and also provides an interface between the participant and Fáilte Ireland.

The support office provides another key service in relation to the facilitation of micro-firm owner/manager learning. All training presenters, activities and materials are rigorously examined to ensure relevance with an action emphasis and several procedures are in place to ensure these criteria are met. These procedures include the submission of lesson plans from presenters, trial workshops attended by the CBTLN support team where content and delivery are critiqued and adjusted where necessary to ensure that participant learning needs are met. Feedback from previous customers is also considered. The support office plays an important role in ensuring that timing, training and content are adequate to meet the training needs of micro-firms which is a departure from the critique often levelled at provider's approaches in the past.

In general findings show that participants are very much reliant on existing structures delivered by the support team. Several observations and comments support this. Most of the submissions for the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice that had less detail provided and less evidence of outcomes and action were from the smaller businesses. Many of these micro-firm owner managers had contact with the office requesting assistance and reassurance about different aspects of the documents they had to fill out. I noted that the

process was particularly difficult for these participants. The CBTLN event evaluations also suggest that ownership of the learning process is poor for this particular cohort. This was evident when one member of the focus group remarked that the evaluations were: '*good for the CBTLN office to see where they're going*'. Findings suggest that the structure of the network reinforces learned helplessness to an extent for the micro-firm owner/manager. Due to unique resource constraints outside the network environment, learning is constrained. The owner/manager does not develop learning competencies but instead becomes reliant on existing structures of the CBTLN. Ownership of the learning process is therefore not assumed.

6.3.3.1.5 Quality and appropriateness of the group's collective experience

Participants were very willing to share their experience with one another and this was evident when the group offered to share their business experience with (AP4). The following examples also represent instances of the group testing their experience in the CBTLN:

- The discussion about the B&B voucher system (6.3.2.5, p.115),
- The relevance of employment law, identified as a learning need (6.3.1.1.2, p.99)
- The implementation of the new pricing system (6.3.2.5, p.115)

The examples provided above of the group sharing experiences all occurred in the focus group sessions but this phenomenon was also observed at several workshops at residential events as well as interaction with the support office. One member suggested that it might be useful to analyse two businesses at some of the local network meetings, where members could share their ideas and what they are doing and get advice/feedback from the others in the group, everyone agreed.

It is also important to note that the group's experience is not always conducive to effective learning and business development. Indeed this was evident in the discussion (6.3.1.1.2) relating to the relevance of learning needs of micro-firm owner managers. It was pointed out by the majority of participants that people management issues were absolutely not

relevant in this setting although in 2005 eighty per cent of labour court cases in Ireland originated from small businesses.

6.3.3.1.6 Learner role duality

Observation suggests that the concept of the participant as both a learner and expert of their own experience comes more naturally to some more confident participants (BP5 for example) than to others. The participant that had contacted the office offering IT training to other participants reflects someone who is confident in this role. Other members were more reluctant to engage, although several comments revealed that participants own experience was valuable to others in the CBTLN, *'I suppose we have a lot more to share than we realise'* (AP2). It was also evident that listening to the views of other members of the network resulted in changed perspectives in some instances in relation to learning needs and the value of learning (on-line marketing training; Section 6.3.3.1.1, p.119).

6.3.3.2 Summary of findings (objective 3)

Peer-to-peer learning is prevalent throughout the network and valued by members of the group. This learning relationship could be better facilitated in the CBTLN although issues regarding the quality of the groups' collective experience and its contribution to the learning process require management.

The most successful learning relationships between participants and trainer/presenter appear to be most evident where practical learning occurs and where opportunity is provided to apply learning back to participants' individual businesses. Relevancy of training material is demanded by the group and the business experience and expertise of the presenter/trainer need to be established for participant buy-in in this learning relationship.

Findings reveal that the support office is important to participants on a number of levels and the CBTLN support team are instrumental in facilitating individual learning. There are indications that the structure of the network reinforces learned helplessness to an extent for the micro-firm owner/manager. As the micro-firm owner/manager appears unable to develop learning competencies in the network environment due to the unique constraints

which impact on the learning process outside of the network environment, he/she becomes reliant on existing structures of the CBTLN and ownership of the learning process is not assumed.

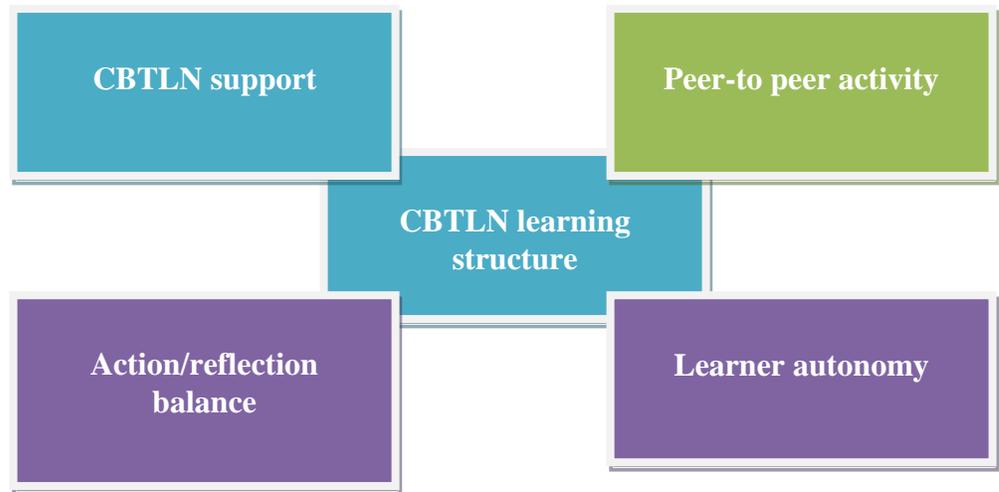
Findings show that feedback varies from one LN to another regarding the effectiveness of the learning relationship between facilitator and participant. Some suggestions for improving this relationship and the LN intervention have been outlined and implemented within the action research cycle in this research.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter profiled the findings resulting from the core action research project, examining how each finding addressed the primary research objective. The adopted research approach allowed the researcher to explore micro-firm owner/manager learning in the network through researcher immersion in the learning environment. The value of presenting these findings is in mapping the criteria that influences owner/manager learning in a micro business environment and these findings will subsequently inform the framework for micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment (objective 4).

The findings summarised under each objective in this chapter consist of data collected from researcher observation, focus group data, and document analysis and participant/stakeholder feedback. Findings discussed above under objectives 1-3 were grouped into themes in order to inform the micro-firm framework (objective 4) in context. These themes are displayed next in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2
Key themes from research findings



Chapter 7

Discussion

7.0 Introduction

The main aim of this research was to analyse owner/manager learning in a micro business environment. This required an investigation of the following objectives which form the basis of the subsequent discussion, to reiterate these objectives are:

1. To identify the levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment.
2. To examine the relationship between learning acquired and learning impact – changes which become embedded in the business.
3. To analyse the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the network.
4. To propose a framework for owner/manager learning in the micro/business environment.

The research approach allowed the researcher to explore the research from the vantage point of an insider; themes emerging from the initial stage of the research and the literature review were tabulated (Chapter 3, Table 3.4, p.47). These themes will be discussed in light of their influence on micro-firm owner/manager learning. The findings from each of the objectives are then discussed in conjunction with the related theory. This chapter is therefore divided by research objectives and related themes are discussed under each. Finally the framework (objective 4) is refined in light of the subsequent discussion.

Objective 1

7.1 Identifying the levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment.

7.1.1 Levels of learning in the network environment

Issues requiring exploration for the purpose of establishing levels of learning on the CBTLN programme comprised:

7.1.1.1 Learning preference

7.1.1.2 The identification of learning needs

7.1.1.3 Reflection

7.1.1.1 Learning preference

Findings show that the majority of the group displayed a preference for action learning, this concurs with other research (Kolb et al., 1986; Gibb, 1997; Hannon et al., 2000). While other styles were identified throughout the research a majority preference for action over reflection was evident throughout the findings. Kolb (1976) contends that achieving double loop learning requires reflexive capability. Thus it was evident throughout the study that the reflexive observation skills of CBTLN micro-firm owner managers require development if deeper levels of participant learning are to be achieved (Garavan and Ó'Cinnéde, 1994b; Sullivan, 2000 and Schaper et al, 2005).

The value of learning styles has been criticised by many including Laurillard (1979) and Reynolds (1997). Reynolds (1997) contends that an alternative approach to focusing on individual learning styles would be to encourage learners to reflect upon what learning means to them. Adopting this approach with the second focus group aided the reflection process and participants were more engaged in the subsequent discussion, confirming previous findings in this context (Gregory, 1994). As found in many previous studies (Chapter 2, Section 2.1.2.1, p. 19) time was found to be a learning constraint in the context of reflection confirming Kolb's (1984) contention that developing the reflexive practitioner role is difficult in this environment.

7.1.1.2 The identification of learning needs

Gibb (1997) noted there is nothing special about one set of skills or knowledge rather it is relative to the owner/manager, the business and the learning context. As the learning needs of this cohort were highly differentiated the learning needs analysis (LNA) was utilised by the researcher as a pre-change measure as recommended by Mumford (2001). Findings support the notion that entrepreneurial learning is an unconscious informal and unintentional process (Devins et al., 2005). This was evident when the group indicated that completing the LNA was the first time they had identified their learning needs. This is exemplary of learning as a product of a business process rather than a process in itself and this finding concurs with Gibbs (1983) assertion that the analytical process is bypassed by the small-firm owner/manager. Reported levels of apprehension among the group filling out the LNA (6.3.1.1.2, p.99) also suggest that this is a difficult and unfamiliar process for the micro-firm owner/manager, perhaps reflecting ‘life’ versus formal management development experience (O’Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Schaper et al., 2005; Storey and Cressey, 1996).

Findings show that a different approach to identifying learning needs would be adopted by participants in the future, with participants more focused now about their learning need requirements: *‘I can’t believe the way that I filled that out back then’*. While this is exemplary of the value of reflection (as suggested by Kolb, 1976), it is also evidence of analytical development following the focus group discussion. It may also be evidence of the development of a more strategic outlook in relation to future learning needs, a development recommended by Wyer et al. (2000) and Gibb and Scott (2001) in this context. If learning is undertaken for more strategic motivations it is more likely that it will result in change [double loop learning] (Patton et al., 2000). This supports the suggestion that participants would benefit from revisiting their learning needs; this would require support at the conclusion of the programme.

Resource constraints were evidently an influencing factor on the effectiveness of this part of the learning process. The human resources that larger firms have at their disposal are an obvious weak point in the micro-firm setting (reinforcing Storey and Cressey’s (1996) and

Devins et al. (2005) research outcomes). Network supports could be provided in this context to aid this 'pre-entry' phase of the learning process, this would assist the owner/manager at the learning needs identification stage of the learning process (Gibb, 1983). Reflection on a group basis (focus group) also appears to encourage members of the group and increase confidence. The focus group discussion is evidence of reflection on a peer basis referred to in the literature by Gorli (2003) and appears to be a learning barrier release in the context of the micro-firms resource constrained learning environment.

While the ethos of the key CBTLN learning tools (LNA and TBDP) is to encourage participant reflection, it appears that the majority of micro-firm owner/managers do not. Severe time constraints negatively influence the learning capabilities of micro-firm owner/managers in this context (time to analyse and reflect were found to be restricted). These restrictions impact management capability in this setting and consequently inhibit micro-firm business development (Storey, 1994; Perren, 1999).

7.1.1.3 Reflection

As Kolb (1984) highlighted the concept of reflection was difficult for participants and while there was evidence that time constraints are a barrier to reflective practice, the group highlighted that the residential events are helpful in this context, taking the micro-firm owner/manager out of the day-to-day resource constrained business environment, confirming the importance of time-out in this particular learning environment (Sullivan, 2000). Participants also mentioned that while a lot of very useful things had been learned on the programme if they were not applied soon they may never be applied. The theory of applicable learning in the small/micro-firm context suggests that a crisis driven approach to learning is adopted in this setting (Lawless et al., 2000). Learning is therefore a result of a business process [single loop] and not a process in itself (reinforcing Argyris and Schön, 1996). As a result learning in the micro-firm environment is not developmental and therefore not considered learning [double loop] in the real sense.

Kolb (1984) explained that encouraging reflective observation can be viewed as a disturbance to the process of action. This was evident during focus group discussions for

example one participant commented ‘...*nice idea but people don’t have the time*’. Kolb suggests that the way conflicts between the dialectically opposed modes of adaptation become resolved determines the level of learning achieved. While some of the reflection tools identified have been found to assist reflection, other tools and structures can be built in to the CBTLN programme to facilitate reflective observation while keeping time constraints in mind.

Examples of reflective practice and double loop learning were evident in a number of instances with participants indicating that they had given various sections of the LNA thought since completing it, others indicated that had not gone over it (the LNA) yet but would in time. Kelliher (2007) contends that double loop learning in the micro-firm context is difficult as the existing norms of the owner/manager and the business may be tacit; findings of this research support this. These norms seem to remain unidentified and unarticulated suggesting that support at pre-entry phase would be a learning barrier release in this context.

The evidence suggests that the learning levels of micro-firm owner managers are initially single loop level where the primary concern is the achievement of goals and objectives while norms remain the unchanged (Argyris and Schön, 1996). Foldy and Creed (1999) suggest that learning progresses from single to double loop level and findings support (Patton et al., 2000) that deeper levels of learning can be facilitated and supported through various learning structures, tools and supports.

7.1.2 Types of learning in the network environment

Types of learning in the network environment are as follows:

7.1.2.1 Formal training interventions

7.1.2.2 Individual learning interventions

7.1.2.3 Informal group learning interventions

7.1.2.4 Classroom based learning interventions

7.1.2.1 Formal training interventions

Findings show that the vast majority of participants enjoy and benefit from formal residential training interventions. Best practice business advice was among the benefits described by participants, supporting the contention that where learning is perceived as being relevant it is valued in the micro-firm setting (Kolb, 1976). Examples of successful learning interventions appear to have an action emphasis (on-line marketing training for example) supporting experiential learning theory advocates such as Kolb (1976) and Gibb (1997). Taking learning outside the micro-firm business environment (into the network environment) offers the potential to turn learning into a process rather than a product (Argyris, 1997) creating an opportunity for the micro-firm owner/manager to step back and take a long-term view of the business. Findings support Sullivan's (2000) contention that this 'time out' is an integral part of the entrepreneurial learning process, with many participants commenting that these events allowed time for them to get away from their business and think.

7.1.2.2 Individual learning interventions

Research to date suggests that learning is important at both an individual and peer level. The findings of this study concur with this to an extent revealing that the individual aspect of learning is important to some participants, although some comments suggest an action emphasis preference over long-term planning or analysis (Lawless et al, 2000; Choueke and Armstrong, 1998). This reflects the crisis approach to management and learning (Lawless et al., 2000) found in the micro-firm setting and is exemplary of single loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

7.1.2.3 Informal group learning (peer-to-peer)

The value placed upon peer-to-peer learning in this environment was evident through suggestions made by participants to incorporate a buddy system and action learning groups into the programme. These comments confirm that peer-to-peer learning in communities of practice offer learning opportunities (Lave and Wenger, 1988; Gregory 1994). Other indications of the value placed on this type of learning include participant interest in hearing about other participants' perspectives and experiences of implementing change; this

was evident in the example of the group discussion about implementing a new pricing strategy (6.3.2.5, p.115). This is evidence of the intangible asset exchange which Hannon et al., (2000) point out includes experience exchanged within learning relationships. It is also interesting that AP2 felt that implementing parts of what had been learned would require the assistance of others in the area/group. This suggests that there is a peer element to the action phase of the learning process in this particular environment. It is important to note however that drawing from collective experience relies on the quality and appropriateness of that collective experience as pointed out by Greenbank (2000). This would be a valuable topic for future research in the micro-firm learning context. Learning from experience relies upon drawing from previous constructs of an event, in other words the ability to reflect (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998). Greenbank (2000) raises a point which requires consideration in this context; this relates to the owner/managers willingness to reflect upon and analyse the information that has been absorbed.

While there is evidence of collaborative learning in this environment it could be better supported through learning structures (Lave and Wenger, 1988) and used to enhance the learning of others (Schrage, 1991), this would be valuable in the network environment (Senge, 19990).

7.2.1.4 Classroom based training

The research shows that all of the participants found the on-line marketing training very effective in terms of learning and changes ensued in their business. The entire group agreed that the training was successful because the content was simplified [many of the group indicated that their IT skills were not well developed] and relevant. The success of this intervention may be explained by the relevancy and immediate applicability of the material, (Reynolds, 1997; Schaper et al., 2005) allowing the learner to apply learning back to the context of the business. This supports Revans (1982) contention that lasting change in behaviour is more likely to occur from the re-interpretation of past experiences (a view supported by Kolb's (1976) learning process).

7.1.3 Frequency of learning interactions in the network environment

Findings support that the current frequency of learning interventions delivered by the CBTLN in relation to formal learning events appears to facilitate learning in the micro-firm context. The frequency of the formal residential interventions appear to provide the owner/manager with time to engage in the learning process whilst not being so frequent that it inhibits their ability to take part in this intervention (Chapter 2; Section 2.1.2.1, p.19). There is evidence to suggest that less formal interventions are not as successful in terms of learning although opportunities have been identified to facilitate deeper learning in this regard. These opportunities will be discussed later in the chapter.

7.1.4 Discussion summary - objective 1

The findings show a majority preference for action learning. The group also displayed a preference for drawing on previous experience and knowledge (experiential learning). Different learning styles also appear to link to different reflection styles. **(Framework: over action - under reflection).**

It is also evident that the content of the LNA led to participant expectations that require management. The LNA is not seen as valuable in terms of a continuous learning needs analysis or development. Terminology and relevance are major barriers to the analysis of learning needs. **(Framework: Participant management).**

Findings also suggest that the views and norms of the owner/manager remain unidentified and unarticulated throughout the learning process. This indicates that support at pre-entry phase would be a learning barrier release for micro-firm owner/manager learning in the network environment. **(Framework: Pre-entry support).**

The focus group discussion confirms the value of peer reflection and analysis. This appears to be a learning barrier release in the micro-firm setting (supporting Kelliher (2006) research findings). Several statements made confirmed that participants would go about filling out the LNA differently in the future are perhaps evidence of a more strategic

approach to the identification of learning needs and the analysis of those needs.
(Framework: Peer reflection)

Formal training interventions allow the owner/manager to take time out of the business and engage in the learning process (Chapter 2: Section 2.1.2.1, p.19). Relevance is demanded by the group. Individual one-to-one sessions are more successful with members that appear more willing and open to reflect on their learning needs and analyse their business problems. More action focused participants appear impatient that solutions are not provided to their business concerns and problems. Findings also indicate that peer-to-peer learning in the learning set could be facilitated more effectively than it is at present. The majority of participants related a degree of disappointment in relation to the objectives of the LN meetings and the way that they were facilitated.

(Framework: Learning structures)

7.2 Relationship between learning acquired and learning impact

Findings seem to suggest that participants perceive the value of reflection to be with the CBTLN support office rather than themselves, this was evident in the following comment: *'I can see the benefit of this [discussing learning in the focus group] for the [CBTLN] support office.'* As such, participants are resistant to entering the reflective phase of the learning process (Kolb, 1984). This barrier would need to be overcome for true learning to take place. The value of reflection would need to be reinforced in terms of tangible returns for the owner/manager to give it credence. Some members of the group indicated that they found the focus group discussion beneficial in terms of reflecting on learning needs confirming other findings that the learning set enhances individual learning in this context (Gorli, 2003; Gregory, 1994). Time restriction was offered as a reason for non-reflection, confirming the findings of other small-firm studies (Storey and Cressey, 1996; Lange et al 2000; Sullivan, 2000 and Cunliffe, 2004).

Findings show that the learning expectations of participants were exceeded but the indications are that these were not well developed and/or analysed at the start of the programme (Chapter 6, section 6.3.2, p.111) as Gibb (1983) suggested. In general learning seemed to be motivated by immediate problem solving in the businesses rather than analysis or planning, consistent with other findings (Sullivan, 2000). While there were instances where analysis was prevalent (Chapter 6, Section 6.3.2) these instances were infrequent and support Gibb's (1983) argument that having not analysed the problem adequately the owner/manager often will not know what needs to be known.

7.2.1 Ownership of the learning process (anchor)

Although participants stated that they see the need to be responsible for their own learning, findings indicate that participants are very much reliant on existing programme structures to ensure that their learning requirements are met. Observations (outlined in Chapter 6, section 6.3.2.1, p.112) suggest that learning ownership is not strong among the group. Foley et al. (2007) refer to greater learner involvement being required at each stage of the learning process to ensure deeper learning however Wyer et al. (2000) contend that even where learning is perceived as relevant, a level of skill is required by the owner/manager in order

to anchor learning. This requirement was reflected when the group indicated that they understood the need to be responsible for their own learning, yet they appeared unsure as to how they would achieve this. This appears to suggest that the unique micro-firm learning process requires additional support in this environment. Findings (Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.3, p.103) also reinforce the value that participants place on learning tools provided by the CBTLN to aid reflection and plan action (namely the evaluations and top tips sheet).

Lack of learning ownership was particularly evident in the identification of learning needs, achieving learning objectives and evaluating learning. Jōgi and Karu (2004) suggest that it may not be unwillingness on the part of individuals; it is more likely that this is reinforced through existing learning structures in the network setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) look at the kinds of social interactions that provide the context and opportunity for learning to take place (1991: 14) and contend that learners do not acquire structures or models to understand the world, but they participate in frameworks (contexts) that already have structure. It appears that some existing CBTLN structures/tools reinforce learned helplessness (Jōgi and Karu, 2004) in the micro-firm context, these structures and tools will be discussed later.

Findings support the view that learning ownership was important to individuals (Section 7.2.1, p.139), for example suggestions were provided from the group that would allow ownership to be facilitated (namely extensions to the evaluations, buddy system, action learning groups) suggesting a level of autonomous learning in the group (Candy, 1987). It could be argued then that while ownership initially appears to be weak, there are examples where participants wanted to assume ownership for learning. Beckwith (1991) asserts that allowing the learner to manage his/her own learning encourages deeper learning. There is also evidence however that this requires the development of owner/manager learning competencies (Wyer et al., 2000), these need to be developed and supported to facilitate deeper learning in this environment.

7.2.2 Learning intervention – relevance to participants

Findings show that where learning was perceived to be particularly relevant [on-line marketing training for example] participants were actively involved in the learning process and excited about implementing what they had learned. This reinforces the view that deeper levels of learning are achieved by ensuring relevance (Beckwith, 1991). Contrasting reports from two of the same learning interventions (6.3.1.2.3, p.108 and 6.3.3.1.3, p.123) provide examples of ‘buy in’ and action from groups where the purpose/objectives of interventions are viewed as relevant also supporting Beckwith’s (1991) assertion that relevance ensures deeper levels of learning. Even where learning is perceived as relevant learners still require a level of skill to embed that learning back in the business environment (Wyer et al., 2000).

On the other hand where learning interventions were seen as less relevant, participants were very vocal about having their time wasted (reinforcing the resource constraint issue highlighted in the literature review, (Chapter 2; Section 2.1.2.1 p.19), challenged the learning material and the presenters knowledge (6.3.3.1.2, p.122) and were not open to the learning process, with the result that very little is learned and applied. This mirrors Kolb’s (1976) description of the adult learner demanding that relevance and application of ideas be tested against their own experience and wisdom. Experience has been found to be a major source of learning in other small-firm studies (Chouke and Armstrong, 1988).

Other findings show that participants demand relevance and an opportunity to test their own experience against what is being learned, concurring with Kolb’s (1976) assertion that combining the best of traditional methods with experiential methods such as apprenticeships and cooperative education are successful in this environment.

7.2.3 Development of participant analytical competencies

Findings confirm that analytical skills appeared poorly developed initially; they did show signs of improvement over the course of the focus group discussion (Table 6.5, p.114). This could be partially explained due to participation in the focus group, as this is a form of reflection. This observation would be consistent with Lawless et al’s (2000) contention that involving the learner by allowing time for learners to reflect on the applicability of theory

to their own environment, transforms the learning process and aids adult learners to better understand the reasons for their problems and the options open to them. The focus group discussion seems to support the value of collaborative learning in this environment as supported by (Perren, 2000) a factor of the learning process which is often neglected in the small and micro-firm environment (Ballantine, 1998; Kelliher, 2006).

Taking time to reflect, led to changes in the views and behaviour of the group and statements of intended action were made (Cunliffe, 2004). The group discussion also appeared to boost the confidence of participants and they began to think more strategically about their learning needs. Patton et al. (2000) suggest that if learning/training is undertaken for more strategic motivations that it may be more likely that it will result in change (double loop learning). A marked difference between the two focus groups confirms the importance of reflection to the learning process (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Kolb, 1984).

7.2.4 Learning acquired

Table 6.4 (p.105) shows learning acquired through various CBTLN interventions, this learning is assisted through CBTLN relationships and structures and is aided with various learning tools. While ensuring relevance and encouraging ownership and development of the analytical process assists the learner to transfer learning back to the business environment (as per Beckwith, 1991 and Foley et al., 2007) other issues require consideration in relation to the examination of learning impact.

7.2.5 Learning impact

Participants agreed that they embrace change however a range of comments support the notion that micro-firm learning is extremely constrained due to resource poverty (supporting the findings of Devins et al., 2005). Several participants stated that although they hadn't made changes yet, that they did plan to. This intention to change behaviour is a component of Beach's (1980) definition of learning and does constitute learning, however in the micro-firm environment resource poverty acts as a learning barrier to action (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006). These findings reflect Kolb's (1976) contention that it is important to note not only where enquiry begins but where it goes.

Findings suggest that participants get caught up in the day-to-day running of the business and examples of learning were provided that equate to what Argyris (1997) defined 'basic learning', this being the identification of a problem and corrective action to follow it. There are several examples of this type of learning where changes have been made with immediate results. Participants relayed 'stories' of successful implementation of learning to other group members and this appeared to motivate the group. This is exemplary of double loop entry (Argyris, 1997). It is important to note that some of the examples of learning provided were very task focused constituting single loop learning (Argyris, 1997).

While certain learning structures act as learning enablers other tools appear to reinforce behaviour that is counter productive to double loop learning. Several tools are utilised to assist learners to put what they have learned into context however time restrictions of the micro-firm owner/manager must be kept in mind. It was interesting to note that although many participants commented on the usefulness of these tools that with the '*best of intentions*' learning would not be applied if there was not some form of follow up, restricting progression through Kolb's (1976) learning loop. This comment suggests the need for support at this stage of the learning process. While Lawless et al. (2000) contend that allowing for reflection on the applicability of learning transforms the learning process, learning barriers amplified by resource constraints in the micro-firm setting result in a necessity to build time for reflection and application of learning into existing CBTLN learning structures and tools, while the network provides information and resources that would otherwise be unavailable to the micro-firm owner/manager (Witt, 2004).

7.2.5.1 Learning barrier release criteria

Although participants strongly agreed that they were willing to embrace change. Several barriers were identified in the context of micro-firm owner/manager learning and the application of that learning. These will now be discussed under the relevant resource criteria.

7.2.5.1.1 *Time*

Time was the most prevalent barrier to learning; it was mentioned in several instances throughout the focus group discussion and on numerous occasions in my role as research assistant with the CBTLN support office. These observations therefore highlight time as a major barrier to learning for the micro-firm owner/manager reflecting the findings of previous researchers in this field of study (Lange et al., 2000; Storey and Cressey, 1996) and it seriously diminishes their ability to reflect. Time constraints also have an impact on follow-through/ action. This particular barrier was evident in several instances including:

BP5: *'If I had a couple of minutes a week it would help...'* [Identifying learning needs]

AP5: *'...nice idea but people don't have the time'* [Reflection on learning]

AP6: *'With the best of intentions if I don't apply it soon I may never apply it'*. [Action after learning]

BP1: *'I know that I am supposed to but I just don't get the time'*. [Application of learning]

While several tools and structures appear to enable learning in the micro-firm setting, time restrictions need to be kept in mind to ensure that learning enablers can be further developed, as other researchers have pointed out the managers absence causes major upheaval in this setting (Schaper et al., 2005). Findings suggest that deeper levels of learning are achieved if learning is relevant to the owner/manager, however as previously stated even where learning is perceived as relevant a level of skill is required by the owner/manager to anchor that learning (Wyer et al., 2000).

7.2.5.1.2 *Human resources (HR)*

As the owner/manager is the key human resource in the micro-firm setting (Lean, 1998) and is caught up in the day-to-day running of the business, he/she is often not aware of learning needs and opportunities for meeting those needs (Gibb, 1983). Awareness of learning needs such as legal obligations, employment law and health and safety legislation were low. This concurs with Gibbs' (1983) assertion that the micro-firm owner/manager bypasses the analytical process and as a result will often not know what needs to be known. Time restriction is also evident as a learning barrier in this context. Lack of awareness of

regulatory obligations was also found to be restrictive in the application of learning; this was evident in the example of applying new pricing strategies in a participant's business (Table 6.6, p. 115).

7.2.6 Discussion summary - objective 2

The group appears willing to take ownership of their learning but tools and structures are required to facilitate this. It is also evident that some existing structures/tools appear to reinforce learned helplessness thus creating the false impression that ownership is not strong among this cohort. **(Framework: Learning structures).**

While findings show that learning expectations were exceeded they were not well developed initially, supporting the need for assistance at pre-entry phase **(Framework: Support at pre-entry phase).**

Where learning is relevant and immediately applicable reflection is welcome and change ensues. Findings suggest that relevance is key in terms of reflection and double loop learning. Reflection does not necessarily seem to equate to action in this environment and there is evidence that the owner/manager does not see the value of reflection, suggesting that some form of additional support is required. The owner/manager needs assistance to develop learning competencies in order to anchor learning in the micro business environment **(Framework: Final session and follow up)**

Analytical skills did show signs of improvement as the focus group sessions progressed. Group interaction and collaboration are valuable in this context. **(Framework: Modify learning structures to facilitate collaborative learning and reflection)**

Objective 3

7.3 An analysis of the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the CBTLN

The third objective of this study was to analyse the learning relationships amongst stakeholders within the CBTLN. These relationships are an integral part of the learning process (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). This analysis required the identification of the primary learning relationships between the relevant stakeholders (as outlined in 6.3.3.1). The effectiveness of these learning relationships in relation to micro-firm owner/manager learning is also discussed and subsequently how these relationships might be improved is considered.

7.3.1 Key CBTLN learning relationships

These relations are now discussed in turn.

7.3.1.1 Learning relationship between participants (peer-to-peer)

Findings show that there is evidence of peer learning and group interaction in the network supporting the views of social learning theorists (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991) that learning emerges from networks of relations (communities of practice). There is some evidence to supports Down's (1999) contention that learning can be socially constructed, participants remarked that the network was effective in the facilitation of peer-to-peer learning however findings suggest that a stronger emphasis could be placed on this type of learning. This was evidenced through several recommendations regarding how peer-to-peer learning could be better facilitated in the CBTLN.

The value placed on the experience and skills of members of the network was revealed through suggestions made by participants to incorporate a buddy system and action learning groups into the programme. Indeed Storey and Cressey (1996) have previously highlighted the importance of this experience with regard to business success. These suggestions are exemplary of the value placed upon peer learning within the group and are an endorsement of the value that participants place upon each other's experience as business people

(O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000). Focus group interaction in this research is exemplary of the value of conversation in this setting as pointed out by Brown and Duguid (1991) and is an informal benefit and an outcome of relationship interaction in this type of learning environment. A willingness to help each other was evident throughout the research, even in the wider network (for example the participant who volunteered to provide computer training to peers). Evidence of the group testing their ideas and experiences among their peers (Chapter 6, Section 6.3.2.5 p.115, learning impact) is exemplary of what Down (1999) refers to as information exchange relations or Hannon et al. (2000) refer to as intangible asset exchange. There is evidence in this research to suggest that this information exchange leads to changes in behaviour (double loop learning), supporting Perren's (2000) contention that collaboration through collective learning gathers individual knowledge and experience and creates added value.

Down (1999) contends that linkages with other firms that have different knowledge contexts and resources increase the potential for enhanced learning. Indeed the value of collective learning in seeking double loop learning has been previously confirmed (Gregory, 1994 and Kelliher, 2006: 62) in the micro-firm environment.

7.3.1.2 Learning relationship between participant and workshop trainer/presenter

Findings reveal that participants challenge the presenter's knowledge and actively question the relevance of the learning material, demanding that content is relevant to their business and business sector, this concurs with other findings (O' Dwyer and Ryan, 2000), where topics were seen as less relevant participants were not open to learning. This corresponds with the findings of other micro-firm learning studies in an Irish context (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000).

The most successful learning relationships between participants and trainer/presenter appear to be evident where practical learning occurs and where that learning can be applied, in concept at least, back to participants' individual businesses. This supports Kolb's (1976) theory of learning where the learner moves from experience to reflection, relating learning back to their own business environment through conceptualisation the owner/manager

integrates observations into sound theories, achieving deeper levels of understanding (Argyris, 1997). I witnessed an example of this at the product development workshop at one of the residential events where the presenter used exercises and tools to engage the learners in the process and apply what they were learning to business situations. As Kolb (1976) contends the learner through active experimentation uses these theories to solve problems and make decisions. Tools and interventions that facilitate reflection are therefore a learning barrier release in the micro-firm context and as such will inform the framework on owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment.

7.3.1.3 Learning relationship between participant and facilitator

There was contrasting feedback from the different focus groups in relation to the perceived effectiveness of facilitators and issues raised included control, advice and guidance (Table 6.4 p.105). Time restrictions were also evident with participants commenting on their reliance on the facilitator to pick up valuable information for them, reinforcing the value of the network in the provision of information and resources that would be otherwise unavailable (Witt, 2004). This negativity levelled at the LN meetings can be partially explained by the perception that this particular intervention is not all that relevant to the micro-firm owner/manager. This also represents a learning barrier in the context of this particular intervention.

Findings indicate that there may be misunderstanding and confusion on the part of the participant about the relevance and objectives of these sessions suggesting that clearer communication is required from the CBTLN support office to both the facilitators and participants to ensure greater effectiveness in this learning relationship.

7.3.1.3.1 Learning dynamic between facilitators

Findings suggest that there is a desire among facilitators to share best practice in conjunction with the support office. Several suggestions made seem to indicate the requirement for agreement among the CBTLN stakeholders on the ethos of the various learning intervention whilst keeping in mind and respecting the individual goals that each

respective learning set will have. This could be facilitated through the CBTLN support office and is exemplary of a collaborative learning opportunity (Schrange, 1991).

7.3.1.4 Learning relationship between participant and provider

Findings suggest that the CBTLN support office is important to participants on a number of levels. The support staffs provide an information hub for participants but also provide assistance with initial apprehension, reassuring participants of the programmes relevance and explaining how learning can positively impact their respective businesses (6.3.3.1.4, p. 125). In general, findings show that participants are very much reliant on existing structures delivered by the support team. Several observations and comments support this. The support office provides another key service in relation to the facilitation of micro-firm owner/manager learning through tailored learning structures. All training presenters, activities and materials are rigorously examined to ensure relevance and an action emphasis; several procedures are in place to ensure these criteria are met. These procedures include the submission and evaluation of lesson plans from presenters. Trial workshops attended by the CBTLN support team ensure that content and delivery are evaluated and adjusted where necessary to ensure that the training content meets participant needs. Feedback from previous customers is also considered. This process ensures that the timing, delivery and content of interventions are adequate to meet the training needs of small and micro-firms, this represents a departure from the critique often levelled at providers in the past.

Levels of control and degree of resource dependency have been cited as variables in the effectiveness of this participant provider relationship (Patton et al., 2000), and one that is amplified in the context of micro-firm resource poverty. This is precisely why the learners own experience and feedback is valued and reinforced in the ethos of the CBTLN network.

Previous research shows that learner autonomy must be encouraged in this environment if the learning relationship is to be successful (Jōgi and Karu, 2004 and Sadler-Smith et al., 2000). It is important that responsibility for this is equally understood by both parties and facilitated through the support office (Lave and Wenger, 1991 and Patton et al., 2000). This

could be achieved through an insistence that learning and development competencies are developed through the programme's learning structures and disseminated through the programme's key stakeholders responsible for the delivery of the training content. This concurs with Gomez et al. (2004) suggestion that the provider should seek to establish a relationship between participant training strategy and learning capability to assist knowledge transfer.

7.3.2 Quality and appropriateness of the groups' collective experience

Participants were very willing to share their experience with one another and there were several instances where the group tested their experience with one another (6.3.3.2, p.127). Kolb's (1976) model of learning is valuable in building the framework on micro-firm owner/manager learning (objective 4) as it recognises the important role that experience plays in the learning process. Storey and Cressey (1996) also commented on the value of this 'life experience' arguing that it acts as a buffer against business failure and can also be considered a learning experiment.

Observations from the focus group sessions suggest that a group structure could be utilised to better facilitate collaborative learning, this concurs with other findings (Wenger, 2008; Schrange, 1991; Hannon et al., 2000). This need not be an add-on activity, as time constraints would dictate its success in the micro-firm environment, rather it could be incorporated into existing learning interventions. There is evidence of the success of this type of activity as mentioned in the product development example (outlined in 7.3.1.2).

Participant suggestions to analyse various CBTLN member businesses at some of the local network meetings (where members could share their ideas and what they are doing and get advice/feedback from the others in the group) are exemplary of the value the group place on each others experience, this represents the intangible asset exchange Hannon et al. (2000) refer to (Chapter 3; Section 3.7.2, p.44). This observation coupled with other comments and observations suggest that there is disappointment that the groups 'collective experience' is not shared/utilised more often. This represents a lost learning opportunity to enhance group learning, a finding consistent with other research (Schrange, 1991).

Greenbank (2000) contends that owner/managers are at the mercy of the quality and accurateness of their own information and it is not always conducive to effective learning and business development. This particular issue was evident in the discussion (6.3.1.1.2, p. 99) relating to the relevance of the learning needs of micro-firm owner/managers. The majority of participants pointed out that people management issues were '*absolutely not relevant*', although in 2005 eighty per cent of labour court cases originated in small businesses. This is evidence that the groups experience is not always conducive to effective learning however this problem can be combated. Group discussion could be facilitated, in an environment where a qualified presenter/facilitator can oversee the process and encouraging reflection (Kolb, 1984) an approach recommended by Reynolds (1997). This would create a framework within the learning set that challenges and encourages (Gregory, 1994) and increasing the sophistication of networking should improve the quality of learning in this context (Johannisson, 2000). This would also ensure that analysis and reflection are encouraged and as a result deeper levels of learning are achieved (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

7.3.3 Learner role duality

The concept of the participant as both a learner and expert of their own experience is referred to as 'role duality' (Bottrup, 2005). There was evidence that this role comes more naturally to some more confident participants while others are more reluctant to engage in this role, although several comments indicate the value placed on individual experience within the CBTLN group. Bottrup (2005) contends that this can result in the engagement of developmental learning where participants acquire the ability/capability to change their perspective. This is consistent with the primary learning orientation of this study (behaviourist), in that the behaviour of the individual changes (Beach, 1980; Revans, 1982). It was evident that the views of other members of the network resulted in changed perspectives of other members, specifically in relation to learning needs and in relation to the on-line marketing training (6.3.3.1.1 p.119). I did not set out to discover if these changes of perspective led to changes back in participant businesses but this could be a valuable topic for future research.

7.3.4 Discussion summary- objective 3

Findings show that there is evidence of peer learning and group interaction in the network. Participants remarked that the network was effective in the facilitation of peer-to-peer learning however findings suggest that a stronger emphasis could be placed on this type of learning as it offers the opportunity to encourage and support deeper levels of learning in the micro-firm context. The quality and accurateness of the groups own information and experience is not always conducive to effective learning and business development suggesting the need for the process to be facilitated (**Framework: Facilitate peer learning and interaction**).

The most successful learning relationships between participants and trainer/presenters appear to be evident where practical learning occurs and where that learning can be applied, in concept at least, back to participant's individual businesses. Tools and interventions that facilitate reflection are therefore a learning barrier release in the micro-firm context and as such will inform the framework on owner/manager learning in the micro business environment (**Framework: Tools and interventions to facilitate reflection**).

Findings indicate a level of negativity exists on the participant's behalf in relation to the LN meetings. Views expressed indicate that this particular intervention is not seen to be that relevant to the micro-firm owner/manager. This represents a learning barrier in the context of this particular intervention and as such it requires clearer communication from the support office to participants and facilitators (**Framework: Communication and best practice sharing**).

Findings suggest that the CBTLN support office is important to participants on a number of levels. The degree of resource dependency (cited as a variable in the effectiveness of this participant provider relationship) is amplified in the micro-firm context and as such learner autonomy must be encouraged in this environment if the learning relationship is to be successful. Responsibility for this must be equally understood by both parties and facilitated through the support office (**Framework: Facilitate learner autonomy through the development of learning competencies**).

Objective 4

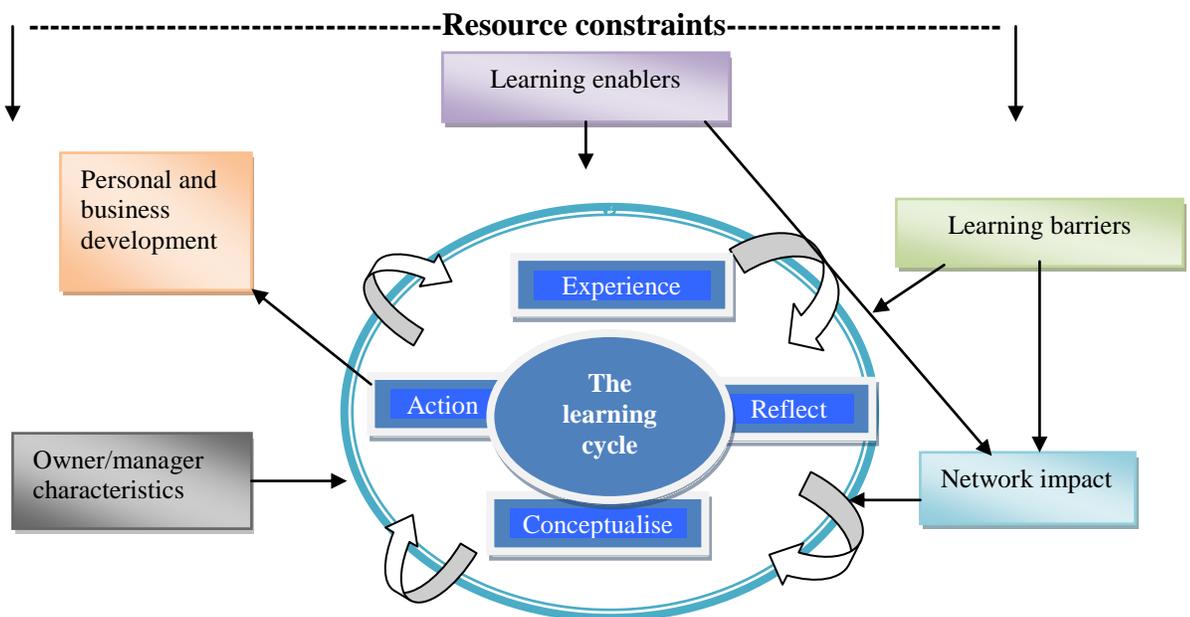
7.4 A framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment
Objective 4 sought to propose a framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business network environment. A review of the literature allowed the researcher to classify the main themes found to influence owner/manager learning in this context.

Table 3.4
Repeated key themes from literature review (page 47)

Theme	Criteria	Influence/Impact
Micro-firm owner/manager characteristics	Informal planner Poor analytical skills Opportunistic and intuitive	No identification or analysis of learning needs Crisis management Value business experience
Resource constraints	Time Limited human resources Financial	Immediately applicable learning is valued Little opportunity for developmental learning No expertise (learning requirements) Little impetus for developmental activity Little investment in learning and training Need to see immediate value added
Learning barriers	Owner/manager inability to reflect Established management practice, views and norms Low autonomy/ responsibility Perception of relevance of subject/ material Learning structures Ineffective learning relationships	No reflection no action Not open to change Learned helplessness Low levels of engagement in the learning process Reinforce learned helplessness Reliance on informal information to aid decision making
Learning enablers	Learning tools to aid reflection Learning structures Effective learning network relationships	Reflexive practitioner role developed Increased ownership of the learning process Facilitate and enhance individual learning in the network setting
Network impact	Learning structures Stakeholder learning relationships	Engagement, contribution Reflection and anchor Share different knowledge contexts and resources Challenge and enquire

These themes informed the subsequent framework (objective 4). Kolb's (1976) learning model offers a useful starting point from which the framework for owner/manager learning can be developed, as it outlines the individual learning cycle. Kolb's model was adapted to show the relationship between individual micro-firm owner/manager learning and the impact of the network environment on that learning (Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1
A framework for owner/manager learning in a micro-business environment



7.4.1 Refinement of the framework

The framework is further developed in light of the key themes emerging from the research findings (Table 7.1).

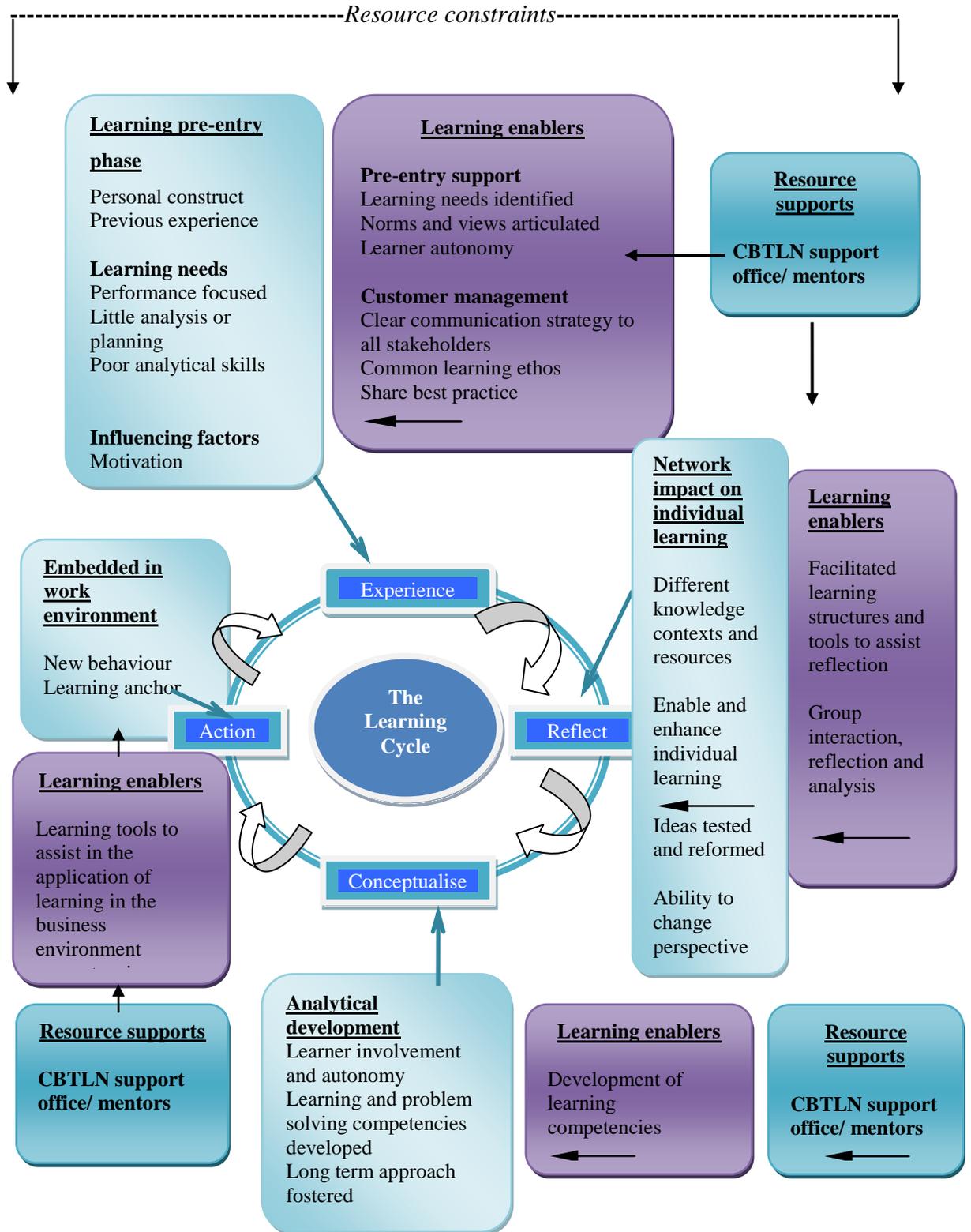
Table 7.1
Key themes from findings

Theme	Theory	Findings
Micro-firm owner/manager characteristics	Informal planner Opportunistic and intuitive Poor analytical skills	Emphasise action over reflection Support required at pre-entry phase
Resource constraints	Time: Immediately applicable learning is valued Human: No expertise (learning requirements) Financial: Little investment	Structures and tools developed with time constraints in mind (Build into existing learning structures) Require support to identify and articulate learning needs at pre entry phase Learning competencies require development
Learning barriers	Owner/manager inability to reflect Autonomy/ responsibility Relevance	Learning tools and structures required to enable reflection and encourage autonomy Communication and sharing best practice
Learning enablers	Learning structures to assist reflection and learning Learning tools and facilitated learning structure to assist reflection and peer learning	Pre-entry support Customer management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer reflection and analysis • Group interaction and analysis • Learning tools to apply learning back to the individual business

This development depicted in Figure 7.2, reflects the impact of the network environment on individual owner/manager learning throughout the various stages of the learning process.

Figure 7.2

A framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment



7.4.2 Conclusion

The research has show that the micro-firm is unique in the learning context thereby requiring specific supports at different phases of the learning process to engage successfully in double loop learning and embed that learning back in the business environment. The network environment can provide these learning supports and learning enablers.

It could be argued in light of the findings that the network provides a learning environment which encourages, supports and enhances the development of analytical skills and learning competencies whilst also providing a knowledge intensive resource for its members.

In the next chapter the author presents the key findings and recommendations. Finally opportunities for further research in relation to this study are identified.

Chapter 8

Recommendations and conclusion

8.0 Introduction

This research sought to analyse the learning relationship amongst stakeholders in the network environment. Having discussed the research findings this chapter outlines the research outcomes and their contribution to knowledge.

The practical and theoretical implications are then outlined. Finally the limitations of this research are highlighted and recommendations for further research and action are presented.

8.1 Aims and objectives

The principal objective of this research is to analyse micro-firm owner/manager learning in a network environment.

1. To identify the levels, types and frequency of learning interactions in the network environment.
2. To examine the relationship between learning acquired and learning impact – changes which become embedded in the business.
3. To analyse the learning relationships amongst the stakeholders within the network.
4. To propose a framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment.

The following section outlines the research findings.

8.2 Summary of research findings

A review of the key literature in relation to this study permitted the researcher to assess the similarities and differences between this study and previous research studies.

An outcome of this research is the provision of the micro-firm owner/manager learning framework. The researcher seeks to facilitate/enable integrative micro-firm owner/manager learning by providing a learning framework within which ideas can be tested, reflected upon and reformed. Learning then becomes embedded in the participant business.

The primary research findings are:

- The micro-firm operates within a very competitive environment, this coupled with significant resource constraints results in an incremental, reactive approach to learning.
- The structure and informal management style found in the micro-firm suggest that owner/manager characteristics influence learning in this context. Micro-firm resource constraints result in unidentified learning needs for this cohort, suggesting that supports are required to assist the micro-firm owner/manager to engage effectively in the learning process.
- The micro-firm owner/manager displays a preference for action learning and relates learning back to their own experience, therefore relevance is demanded to engage these learners. The concept of reflection is difficult for these managers as they prefer to focus on immediately applicable learning. This action emphasis is not conducive to double loop learning.
- The identification of learning needs is a difficult and unfamiliar process in the micro-firm environment. Findings show that learning needs are not well developed initially. This results in the micro-firm owner/manager starting the learning process from a disadvantaged position in comparison to owner managers of larger resource

rich businesses. Findings support a requirement for support for this group at pre-learning phase. This would assist owner managers to articulate norms and establish learning needs.

- Reflection does not necessarily equate to action in this environment and the findings suggest that micro-firm owner/managers require support to develop learning competencies. There is evidence to show that certain tools and structures assist in developing the reflective capability of the micro-firm owner/manager. These tools and structures include building time into learning interventions for peer reflection and analysis. Such supports act as learning enablers in this environment and support learning anchor back in participant businesses.
- Findings show that peer experience is valued in this setting. However facilitation of this form of learning is required to ensure the quality and appropriateness of the groups' collective experience. Facilitation would also ensure that reflection on learning is encouraged.
- The success of other learning relationships identified in this study depend upon a number of factors including the practicality and relevance of the material and an opportunity to apply learning back to the participants own business environment. The expertise of those operating in a facilitator/presenter role needs to be established to ensure buy-in to the learning process from micro-firm owner/managers.
- Findings suggest that the CBTLN support office is important to participants on a number of levels. The degree of resource dependency (cited as a variable in the effectiveness of this participant provider relationship) is amplified in the micro-firm context and as such learner autonomy must be encouraged in this environment if the learning relationship is to be successful. Responsibility for this must be equally understood by both parties and facilitated through the support office

These findings facilitated the development and subsequent refinement of the framework for owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment, as depicted in Figure 7.2 (p. 156).

8.3 Recommendations

The research suggests that the following recommendations may improve owner/manager learning in a micro-business environment.

8.3.1 Learning structures

Residential events and other class-room based training should be incorporated into learning structures for this group. Formal learning interventions such as residential events, allow the micro-firm manager to take time out of their business and engage in the learning process. Less formal learning structures could be facilitated to support learning in this time constricted environment. It is evident that some learning structures and tools can reinforce learned helplessness in this setting thus creating the false impression that learning ownership among this group is not strong.

Based on this research study, individual learning seems to be more successful among participants that appear more willing to reflect upon and analyse their business problems and learning requirements. However a strong preference for action focused learning was evident throughout the research. Reflection needs to be encouraged among this group to ensure effective learning takes place in this environment. Several reflection tools are discussed in more detail below.

The most successful learning relationships (in this network environment) provide practical learning and equip participants with learning tools that provide an opportunity for that learning to be applied, in context at least back in the micro-business. This finding supports the view that relevance and reflection are both key criteria for the achievement of deeper levels of learning. It also suggests that the micro-firm owner/manager requires an opportunity to apply learning back in their own business environment, resource constraints make it unlikely that this will occur outside the network environment.

The findings suggest that group interaction and collaboration are valuable in a micro business network environment although issues regarding the quality and appropriateness of

participant experience and knowledge suggest that elements of peer-to-peer learning should be facilitated.

8.3.2 Pre-entry support

The identification and articulation of learning needs are required early on in the learning process to ensure that a level of autonomy can be developed among micro-firm owner/managers. Support at this stage of the learning process would be a learning barrier release in the micro-firm context as the vast majority of micro-firm owner managers will not have undertaken any form of learning needs analysis prior to programme entry. This support would bridge the current gap in the micro-firm learning process where views and norms of the owner/manager are unidentified and unarticulated. Pre-entry support would be a learning barrier release in this context transforming the learning process from learning product to process in this environment.

8.3.3 Customer management

The ethos of the learning network needs to be communicated to all stakeholders to ensure that learning is seen as a continuous process of development. Findings suggest that micro-firm owner/managers do not see the value of reflection or the relevance of some learning interventions. Best practice sharing among facilitators and trainers in the form of a 360 degree feedback process would assist effective learning relationships and ensure that learning interventions are relevant to and understood by the participant.

8.3.4 Over-action/under reflection

There is a majority preference for action learning in this environment and participants also draw from their previous experience. The research shows evidence of peer reflection and analysis in the network environment and focus group discussions provided evidence of the value of this peer-to-peer learning in the reflection and analysis phase of the learning process. Findings also reveal analytical development in this setting.

Tools and structures to facilitate individual and peer reflection could be built into learning structures (bearing in mind the severe time constraints identified in this context) to assist

deeper levels of learning in this environment. There is evidence that this type of forum results in the development of a more strategic approach to learning.

8.3.5 Learner autonomy and competency development

The importance of reflection to the effectiveness of the learning process has been proven. Yet findings also show that reflection does not necessarily appear to link to action (double loop learning) in the micro-business environment. Findings reveal that owner/managers want to manage their own learning and are willing to take ownership of the process but a level of competency/skill is required to successfully achieve this. These competencies are unlikely to be developed back in the micro-firm business environment due to the resource constraints referred to throughout this research.

8.4 Dual contribution of the study

The main aim of this research was to analyse owner/manager learning in a micro-business environment. The learning catalyst in the context of the research is the Fáilte Ireland Tourism Learning Network south and south east (CBTLN). The adopted research approach allowed the researcher to explore micro-firm owner/manager learning in the network through researcher immersion in the learning environment. Emerging themes were identified and explored; these informed the objectives and subsequent framework outlined in figure 7.2 (p.156). The adopted research approach provides the dual benefit of contributing to research and practice.

8.4.1 Contribution to research

The framework builds on Kolb's (1976) learning model but encompasses the unique characteristics of the micro-firm, acknowledging the unique learning environment in a micro tourism business context. It therefore contributed to the body of knowledge on micro-firm owner/manager learning in this setting. It also offers an insight into the adoption of an action research approach in the context of this study.

8.4.2 Contribution to practice

This research provides an in-depth account of micro-firm owner/manager learning in a tourism network environment. Therefore it may be of interest to practitioners working in tourism training provision and delivery. This research has contributed to practice in the CBTLN network setting through a number of changes and improvements (iterations of the core research project) which are detailed in Appendix C.

A number of the recommendations have been implemented arising from the research findings and in conjunction with CBTLN support office staff input, these include:

1. Additional statements added to CBTLN event evaluations to encourage reflection (Appendix C; Iteration 3)
2. Changes to LN meeting structure to facilitate peer learning and reflection and to build time to discuss learning needs (Appendix C; Iteration 4)
3. The structure and content of key learning documents were amended to ensure greater relevance and understanding (Appendix C; Iteration 8)
4. Recommended best practice sharing ethos disseminated through the CBTLN support office (facilitators in particular).

8.5 Research limitations

There are several research limitations associated with this study.

Researcher immersion presented difficulties in this study and issues arising as a result of this were constantly addressed in the reflective diary ensuring researcher reflexivity. Meetings were held with the research supervisor to discuss observations before both focus groups, this coupled with recording focus group discussions and taking observation notes aided recollection on the part of the researcher and ensured that a vigorous process was maintained throughout the duration of this study.

The researcher also sought to challenge and confront any pre-conceptions arising from researcher immersion by maintaining reflexivity through the maintenance of a reflective diary throughout the duration of the study.

The researcher adopted dual roles for this research project and the chosen research method presented difficulties which have been discussed previously in Chapter 5.

There are also certain limitations associated with single researcher projects namely resource constraints. There is scope for further research in this area of study and within micro-firms situated in other business sectors.

8.6 Recommendations for further research

This study has explored a range of literature in relation to the overall aim of the research; it was not the aim of the researcher to conduct an all encompassing analysis of the subject area. As such there are numerous aspects which require further exploration to develop a deeper understanding of effective learning relationships in a micro-business context, these include:

1. The researcher plans to further develop the framework in light of the findings which suggest that peer-to-peer learning interventions could be very valuable in this setting.
2. There is potential to extend the framework to other micro-business network learning environments in various other business sectors.
3. While it was evident that listening to the views of other members of the network resulted in changed perspectives in relation to learning needs, the researcher did not set out to discover if these changes of perspective led to changes back in participant businesses, this could be an important topic for future research.
4. Researching the move from an action emphasis to a greater emphasis on reflection would be a beneficial topic for further study in the micro-firm context.
5. A future research topic might also look at improving micro-firm owner/manager learner autonomy through learning competency development.

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Appendices

Appendix A

CBTLN stakeholder roles and documents

A.1 CBTLN stakeholder roles

The various CBTLN stakeholders and their roles have been tabulated below in Table A.1.1.

Table A.1
CBTLN stakeholder roles

Stakeholder	Description	Role	Responsibility
CBTLN Support Office (Programme manager, programme administrator, project coordinator and research assistants)		Provide research and industry expertise Participant support Consultation hub Researchers registered for masters in business	Design and delivery of CBTLN programme Research linked to practice of the CBTLN
Facilitators	Matched to the learning set based on learning and development needs of the set	Provide the competencies and resources to take a strategic perspective on business issues within the learning set (LN group). Assists with the completion of the development plan	
Academic Team		Research and support	

A.2 Internal CBTLN documents

The following section provides details of the purpose of the internal CBTLN documents referred to throughout this study.

A.2.1 Tourism business development plan (TBDP)

The TBDP is a five page document structured along four functional business areas that participants complete during the course of the programme. It is driven by learning objectives and provides the opportunity for the learner to self administer a business development plan with the aim of facilitating deeper learning. Participants are assisted in achieving these learning objectives through the CBTLN stakeholders and CBTLN learning structures. The TBDP is used as a control tool in the assessment of participant learning. As such the TBDP is included in the criteria for accreditation of the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice awarded by Waterford Institute of Technology. This is a HETAC level 6 award

A.2.2 Learning needs analysis (LNA)

The LNA is completed by participants before they start the programme. It details five key business areas, listing various business topics under each section. Completed LNA provides the support office with statements of the levels of the capability of owner/managers prior to commencing the programme. It allows the entrepreneur to set learning objectives across a range of functional business areas. Like the TBDP, the LNA is also included in the submission for the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice.

A.2.3 CBTLN learning intervention evaluations

Evaluations are completed and collected after each learning intervention to provide 360 degree feedback to the support team in relation to the success of the learning events, content of training, trainers/presenters, venue, management and a range of other issues. These are analysed by the support team and feedback is passed to the various stakeholders. This influences future learning and networking events promoting refinement and ensuring relevance to participants. These evaluations include CBTLN event evaluations but also CBTLN 6 month facilitator evaluations and CBTLN 6 month programme evaluations.

A.2.4 Local network reports (LN reports)

The local network (LN) meetings comprise the local learning set of 6-8 businesses and a trained facilitator assigned to that cohort. Approximately 6 LN meetings are held

throughout the term of the CBTLN programme. Local network (LN) reports are submitted to the office after each LN meeting is held. These reports capture attendance data and provide details regarding the focus, actions and outcomes of the LN meetings. These reports are filled out by the LN facilitator and are also sent to the participants of each LN for any additional inclusions or exclusions. This report allows the support team to monitor the focus and action emphasis of the various learning sets.

A.2.5 One-to-one reports

The one-to-one meetings provide an opportunity for participants to meet individually with their LN facilitator to discuss business and development issues. These meetings are facilitated once during the term of the programme at the request of participants. Issues discussed at these sessions are also documented with participant agreement.

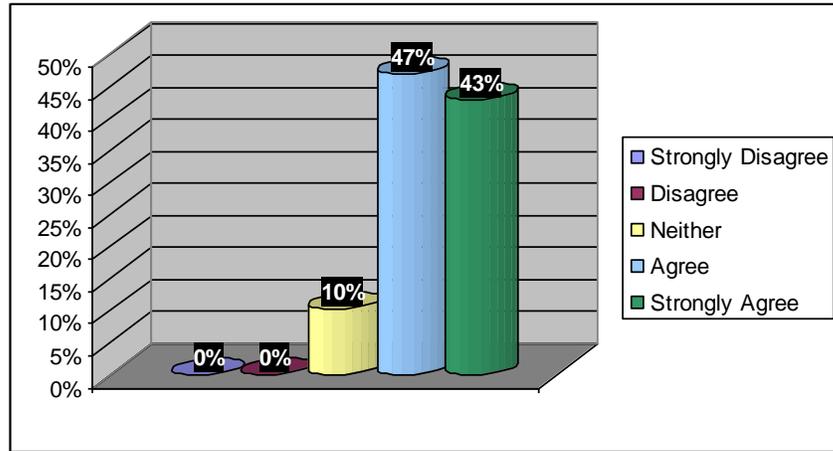
A.2.6 Top tips sheet

The top tips sheet is a reflective learning tool distributed after the residential training events. This one page document allows the participant to note key learning (top tips) that they can take back and apply in their business.

A.3 Learning impact

Figure A.1

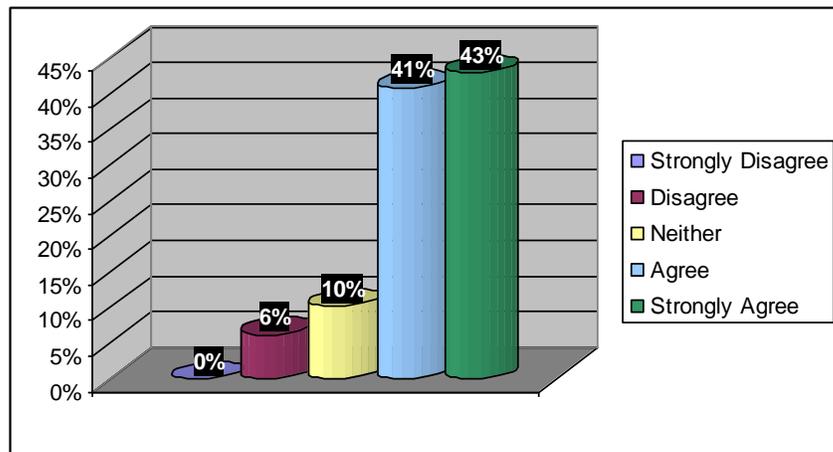
Learning impact- 6 month evaluations results



Ninety per cent indicated that training would have a positive impact on their businesses.

Figure A.2

Practical applicability- 6 month evaluations results



Eighty four per cent indicated that what they had learned could be practically applied in their business.

Appendix B

Data collection protocol

B.0 Data collection activities

The data collection protocol focused on relevant data to collect and how it would be analysed (Chapter 5 Section 7.2). Data collection activities included observation, research diary, focus group and internal CBTLN document review and analysis. The various activities are outlined in subsequent sections.

B.0.1 Observation schedule

Analysing owner/manager learning in the micro-business environment required the observation of micro-firm owner/manager learning in context. This was facilitated through researcher immersion in the studied environment. A detailed observation schedule can be seen next in Table A.2.1.

Table B.1
Observation schedule- CBTLN learning interventions

Learning intervention	South East Region	South Region	Criteria
Network briefing event	15th February 2007	22nd February 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal conversations • Evaluations • Feedback session from each LN group
Local network meetings	Ongoing – 6 per year	Ongoing – 6 per year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LN meeting reports • 6 month facilitator and participant evaluations
On-line marketing training	Various dated allocated from vetting process	Various dated allocated from vetting process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Conversations with project coordinator
Spring residential seminar	25th and 26th April 2007	18th and 19th April 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Informal conversations • Stakeholder review
Autumn residential seminar	17th and 18th October 2007	10th and 11th October 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Informal conversations • Stakeholder review
Optional master classes	21st and 29 th November 2007	21st and 29 th November 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations and feedback • Conversations with project team and coordinator
CBTLN support office	Ongoing	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal conversation • Formal team meetings

B.2 Focus group protocol

The importance of collaboration and input from all stakeholders was emphasised at the initial introductory presentation to participants. Details explaining how future contact would be arranged were outlined and an exclusion option was also detailed. Participants were then contacted and asked to take part in the focus groups at the residential event in April 2007. Prior to the focus group sessions participants were contacted to obtain their commitment to take part in the research. The author ensured that the group did not know each other prior to the event. A time was arranged for the focus groups to occur at the residential event, specifically bearing in mind time constraints for this cohort (discussed in chapter 2).

A series of questions were posed for discussion in the focus group and formally structured questions were kept to a minimum (Riley, 1996: 31). Prompts and probes were utilised to encourage some of the quieter members of the group to get involved. As recommended by Newby et al., (2003) questions were designed in both a reflective and personal manner. Clarification and testing of understanding were also techniques employed by the researcher as recommended by Saunders et al (1998).

The focus group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed with the prior knowledge and permission of the participants. As anonymity had been assured by the researcher, codes were assigned to each participant. These codes are as follows:

- AP1 - AP6 (Focus Group A: Participant 1-6)
- BP1 - BP6 (Focus Group B: Participant 1-6)

A flip chart was used for each of the focus group sessions; this allowed issues which arose to be documented and also provided a visual cue for the group. The focus group protocol is outlined in Table A.2.2.

Table B.2
Focus group protocol

Dates	Participants	Structure	Applied Tools
Introductory presentation (April 2007)	All CBTLN participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objectives outlined • Importance of collaboration reinforced • Exclusion option • Contact arrangements outlined 	PowerPoint presentation
South focus group (A) 10th October 2007	AP1-AP6 (focus group A: participants 1-6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior commitment obtained • Location chosen with micro-firm time constraints in mind • Anonymity assured (codes assigned to participants) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question design <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jargon free 2. Minimise formal questions 3. Reflective design • Prompts and probes utilised • Flip Chart <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Visual cue 2. Documentation of discussion/ideas 3. Recording of discussion • Breakout sessions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Group interaction/testing ideas 2. Learning style preference sheet
SE focus group (B) 17th October 2007	BP1-BP6 (Focus group B: participants 1-6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior commitment obtained • Location chosen with micro-firm time constraints in mind • Anonymity assured (codes assigned to participants) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question design <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jargon free 2. Minimise formal questions 3. Reflective • Prompts and probes utilised • Flip Chart <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Visual cue

			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Documentation of discussion/ideas 3. Recording of discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakout sessions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Deeper perspective provided 2. Group interaction/ testing ideas 3. Learning Style Preference Sheet
Follow up	All focus group participants	Update provided	

B.2.1 Focus group- Descriptive statistics

Table A.2 below outlines details relating to age, gender and business size for the overall focus group participants. Individual statistics are also provided (Table A.2.4 –A.2.4) to allow comparison between the focus groups.

Table B.3
Descriptive statistics –Focus group participants

Age	20-30 16.7%	30-40 16.7% %	40+ 67%
Gender	Male 42%	Female 58%	
Business size (no. of employees)	0-5 33%	5+ 67%	

Table B.4

Descriptive statistics – South focus group participants

Age	20-30 33.3%	30-40 16.7%	40+ 50%
Gender	Male 33%	Female 67%	
Business Size (no. of employees)	0-5 16.7%	5+ 83.3%	

Table B.5

Descriptive statistics – South east focus group participants

Age	20-30 0%	30-40 16.7%	40+ 83.3%
Gender	Male 50%	Female 50%	
Business Size (no. of employees)	0-5 50%	5+ 50%	

B.3 Reflexive diary

Reflexivity was maintained through the use of a reflective diary that was utilised throughout the term of this research project. The narrative was completed on an on-going basis. Several key entries are referred to throughout the thesis, these entries are as follows.

B.3.1 Reflexive diary entry 1

Reflecting on proposed changes that I could potentially introduce, I noted: *'I've been thinking that the introduction of change and the implications that this could have for all of the participants in the network not just the micro-firm owner/managers. I am wondering if these changes will have a positive impact on the rest of the stakeholders in the network. Will this be an issue of concern? What is affirming my opinion that changes I think should be implemented will be good for the group as a whole. Are my ideas for change stemming from my experiences in the CBTLN office or from the literature that I have read. I need to think about the impact on the entire group even though my focus is solely on the micro-businesses in the group'* (May–Aug, 2007).

B.3.2 Reflexive diary entry 2

Questioning if the analytical process developed, I noted; *'I wanted to see if the analytical process develops from the start and the end of the programme. Am I assuming that it has developed? Perhaps it is just better understood, although comments that I am basing my opinion on (approaching the filling out of the LNA differently in the future) were made prior to any changes being enacted'*.

B.3.3 Reflexive diary entry 3

Reflecting back on the first focus group discussion I noted that participants kept focusing and discussing the LNA document instead of the learning needs identification process and how they found the experience, I noted: *'I need to rethink the wording of this question for the next focus group, I don't think that the group understood what I was asking, the focus seemed to be on the document and not the process of learning needs identification, I feel that I need to ensure that the group fully understand what it is I am asking, I need to be clearer in relation to this. I must remember at the same time that this group have not been*

through this process before as such the process to them is the document and how they go about filling it out. What are the implications of that?

B.4 Internal documentary review

The researcher also reviewed several key in-house documents relating to micro-firm owner/manager learning as identified in Table 5.6 p.84 Details of these documents are provided in Appendix A. Meeting notes and email correspondence also provided in-depth knowledge.

Appendix C

Core iterations of the research project

Iteration 1: Addition to the LNA						
Timeframe	Cycle Stage	Research assistant role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher role	Prevalent issues	Value to research project
Oct- Jan	Observe	Observe CBTLN office Observe CBTLN stakeholders Observe CBTLN documents Observe CBTLN learning events	Defining the research problem Research Proposal	Literature review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Micro/firm ▪ Learning ▪ Networks 	Learning needs are highly differentiated	Greater understand of CBTLN network programme and the relevant literature/theory on the research topic
	Reflect	What is the LNA capturing? How effective is it in terms of capturing learning needs and developing/improving the learning process? Discuss with CBTLN support team	Develop research (focus group) questions	How do I measure what learning has occurred? Consult relevant learning literature/theory Discuss with research supervisor	Role conflict and issues of time restrictions due to CBTLN programme roll-out	Perceived learning needs are stated for later use. Assess the process of learning needs identification
	Plan	Propose to amend LNA Meet with CBTLN programme manager and support team to discuss amendments	Change	Discuss with supervisor	Wider impact of changes considered	Encourage reflection Perceived learning needs are stated
	Act	1.LNA amended 2. Presentation 3. CBTLN Learning tools mapped	Develop conceptual framework		Depth of involvement sufficient?	Introduction of the researcher and the research project, its value and the importance of collaboration to the project. Provided a statement of learning methods available to network members

Iteration 2: Observation of learning needs identification process and issues						
Timeframe	Cycle stage	Research assistant role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher role	Prevalent issues	Value to research project
March	Observe	Observed LNA submitted for the CBTLN 2007 programme		Considered relevant learning theory		Greater understanding of the learning needs of the participants and how they are being evaluated by the CBTLN support group and by the participants themselves
	Reflect	<p>The process of identifying learning needs that are most important appears to be difficult for most participants</p> <p>Considered how other aspects of my role as research assistant could assist with my research project.</p>	<p>Incorporate into research (focus group) questions</p>	<p>Consult relevant literature</p> <p>Discuss with supervisor</p>		
	Plan	<p>Plan to incorporate the issues identified above into the research questions.</p> <p>This is the first year that the programme has been awarded HETAC level 6 Certificate. Volunteered to manage processing of accreditation submissions as part of my research assistant role.</p>	<p>Incorporate into research (focus group) questions</p> <p>Inform Framework</p>	<p>Consult relevant literature</p> <p>Discuss with CBTLN support team and research supervisor</p>		<p>Identification of learning needs is an issue which requires exploration for the purpose of the research</p> <p>This will allow me to observe the learning process while carrying out my duties as a research assistant</p> <p>Improvements may be identified to capture and highlight participant learning</p>
	Act	Managing submissions for the Certificate in Tourism Business Practice	Develop focus group questions	<p>Focus group questions adapted to include learning needs identification issues</p> <p>Allows for observation</p>		

Iteration 3: Amended evaluations						
Timeframe	Cycle stage	Research assistant role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher role	Prevalent issues	Value to research project
May	Observe	Working on the accreditation process I began questioning the value of the inclusion of the CBTLN evaluation sheets.		Review learning literature Dropping the happy sheets	Politics- role duality	Evaluate learning after the training interventions
	Reflect	What are the value of these in terms of assessing and anchoring participant learning Could these be used to develop the reflexive practitioner Consider impact for framework		Consider benefit for the CBTLN programme		Develop reflexive practitioner role Inform framework
	Plan	Propose to include the following sections: What have I learned? What can I apply to my business?				Encourage reflection Anchor learning Provide statement of learning
	Act	Discuss and gain agreement from CBTLN support team Add the sections outlined above	Develop focus group questions	Discuss with supervisor Consult relevant theory	Buy-In and support	Team in-put stakeholder perspective



Iteration 4: LN structure and reporting template amended						
Timeframe	Cycle stage	Research assistant role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher role	Prevalent issues	Value to research project
August 2007	Observe	While processing the LN reports I began observing learning within the various LN groups		Networking and learning theory/literature		
	Reflect	Began to consider the value of the learning set within the network (learning environment) and Considered the value of the focus group as a data collection method in terms of individual learning acquired through group learning experiences	Develop framework	Networking and learning theory/literature Research methodology literature	Size of sample Timing and location bearing in mind resource constraints	Examination of the learning element of the CBTLN Local Network groups
	Plan	Encourage reflection in Local Network Group meetings Conduct 2 regional focus groups at the residential learning event Select sample and contact participants	Develop data collection method	Gather questions for focus group from relevant literature and observations and from practice in situ. Research methodology literature		Develop reflexive practitioner Encourage/facilitate anchor learning Gain group perspective Facilitates group discussion
	Act	Meeting with PM to discuss propose changes to LN meetings. LN structure amended to include time to discuss learning and filling out TBDP Facilitator terms of reference and LN Reporting template amended		Literature review		Stakeholder input Learning barrier release

Iteration 5: Pilot focus group						
Timeframe	Cycle stage	Research assistant role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher role	Prevalent issues	Value to research project
Sept- Oct 2007	Observe	Observed the roll out of the programme and the structure of the learning events, considered the focus group as a suitable means of introducing a reflective element after the learning event.		Consulted relevant research methodology literature	Time constraints faced by participants	Select best available method
	Reflect	Severe time restrictions for participants.				
	Plan	Arrange pilot test Sample selection Contact participants Arrange focus groups				Test suitability of focus group questions Reflexive element after learning event
	Act	Pilot conducted Participants contacted for focus groups				Informed focus group questions

Iterations 6: Focus group 1						
Timeframe	Cycle Stage	Research Assistant Role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher Role	Prevalent Issues	Value to Research Project
	Observe			From the pilot study it was evident that the LNA was not very familiar to the participant after a certain period of time had lapsed. It was generally not seen as very relevant Some of the pilot study questions seemed to be unclear/difficult to answer	Needed do incorporate techniques to jog memory	Inform framework (objective 4) Develop tools and techniques to encourage the reflexive practitioner role
	Reflect		Develop research method	Something is required to jog the memory of filling out the LNA Techniques need to be incorporated that will facilitate group discussion		
	Plan			The LNA of the final sample for the focus group will be analysed. Common and uncommon learning needs will be tabulated Content of questions will be jargon/terminology free		
	Act	First focus group conducted			Time constraints	Group interaction and perspective Stakeholder feedback

Iteration 7: Amendments to focus group questions						
Timeframe	Cycle Stage	Research Assistant Role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher Role	Prevalent Issues	Value to Research Project
	Observe	Use blank LNA		Relevance of the LNA was unclear Clear focus on topics Reflexive diary entry 4		Informed second focus group
	Reflect					
	Plan	Amendments to second focus group				More interaction and focus Inform framework
	Act	Second focus group conducted				

Iteration 8: Planning and discussion for changes to key learning documents						
Timeframe	Cycle Stage	Research Assistant Role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher Role	Prevalent Issues	Value to Research Project
	Observe	Second focus group much more interactive LNA doesn't ascertain what they want to learn but what their knowledge levels are on predetermined business subjects			Questioning the value of the LNA as it stands	Enhance the relevance of key learning tools
	Reflect	Relevance				Ensure relevance of key learning documents Educate stakeholders
	Plan	Amend structure and content of the LNA and TBDP Ensure relevancy Cut/minimise use of jargon and terminology Explain use, relevancy and benefit of the documents				
	Act	Meeting with programme co-ordinator to discuss amendments to LNA and TBDP and amendments to procedure document				Stakeholder feedback

Iteration 9: Report and recommendations						
Timeframe	Cycle Stage	Research Assistant Role	Theory and practice into action	Researcher Role	Prevalent Issues	Value to Research Project
End of project	Observe	Due to time restrictions I cannot fully evaluate this however I have discussed with CM and there appears to be more detail in the amended forms			Time restriction of the project	
	Reflect	Perception of LN meetings as a ‘talking shop’ Opportunity to share ideas with the group and learn from others experience and knowledge is missed somewhat.				Value of conversation and focus group highlighted in this setting
	Plan	Amend Local Network structure Report on findings and changes to focus group Report on findings, changes And suggested amendments for SE/SW CBTLN Report for FI Final team meeting before end of project Best practice among facilitators will be part of the agenda for 6 month facilitator evaluation meeting in September		Valuable insight gained	Impact on wider participants within the group	Ensure relevancy Wider stakeholder input and feedback Best practice sharing
	Act	Report and Recommendations				360 degree feedback process

